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Captain's Log

@ANDYDREWZ

FINALLY! The long wait to return to Arrakis is over. When I tell you that I was completely obsessed with the first of Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* movies... We were just out of lockdown, and it was one of the first sci-fi films I was to see in the cinema after so long – it completely blew me away. Now, three years later – how has that happened already? – my house is full of *Dune* books and merchandise. Another one of the many reasons I love *SFX* is it still continues to be a gateway to other worlds I haven't yet explored, despite them being things that would probably have been right up my alley all along.

Another one is *The Walking Dead*. Confession time – before I started this job five years ago I hadn't seen a single episode. I know!! After my first trip to SDCC I thought, "I really should probably know this franchise..." Within 12 months I had binged *every single episode*. And yes, that included all the spin-off shows. I bought the magazines, own the Blu-rays...

I'm still learning about films and shows now – and loving every minute of it. While it's great to have loads of new material coming up, it's fantastic to be able to dig deep into an archive of things I haven't experienced yet. Now, what's going to be the next overdue obsession...?

Darren
X

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ I've been loving watching *Rentaghost* on ITVX – there have been actual tears of laughter.

→ Seen the first few episodes of *3 Body Problem* and *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live* and can't wait to see the rest!

RANTS

→ It would be great for the three latest *Walking Dead* series to see some kind of UK release.

→ A shame that we didn't know anything about the latest *Star Wars* series until we saw the start date on Twitter. Hey ho.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loved *Poor Things* – Emma Stone, Mark Ruffalo, production design and score all impressed. They overdid the fisheye lens, mind.

→ Pleased to see they're making *28 Years Later*. Not pleased to realise that it's 18 years since I did a set visit for *28 Weeks Later*. God, I'm old.

RIP

→ Very sad to hear, shortly before we went to press, about the death of novelist Christopher Priest. Full obituary next issue.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Delighted to hear that Bryan Talbot is taking us back to the world of *Grandville* with his forthcoming prequel *The Casebook Of Stamford Hawksmoor*.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Thanks to Talking Pictures for introducing me to *Pin*, a bonkers 1988 psycho-horror I'd never heard of and which is genuinely odd. Stars a young Terry O'Quinn, *Cube*'s David Hewlett and the voice of Jonathan Banks - Mike Ehrmentraut from *Breaking Bad*!

RIP

→ Michael Jayston, one of those immediately recognisable character actors who quietly got on with it in films and TV series (including *Doctor Who*, of course). When I was a little 'un I always thought he looked like a kind man.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Cautiously excited about a potential revival of *The Avengers*, one of my all-time favourite shows. Casting's going to be crucial. Steed's bowler is up there with the British crown!

RIP

→ Sorry to hear of the passing of horror historian David J Skal. His 1993 book *The Monster Show* is a brilliant overview of the fright industry.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Damsel* was a huge surprise, taking tired fairy tale tropes and reworking them into a story about female compassion and ingenuity. An unexpected gem.

RANTS

→ Actor Matthew August Jeffers, who plays Nat on *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live*, is the greatest addition to the franchise in ages. I'll leave it there.

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Red Alert

MARCH 2024

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Millie Bobby Brown is a *Damsel* facing a dragon

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DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Pure Imagination

The director of horror film **Imaginary** talks teddy bear scares

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

JEFF WADLOW'S RUNNING A FEW minutes late for our interview – and with good reason. The director behind *Kick-Ass 2*, *Truth Or Dare* and the upcoming horror *Imaginary*, about a young girl's terrifyingly real imaginary friend, has just been on the phone with the president of film at Blumhouse.

"We were talking about another imaginary friend movie that's coming out shortly, that just dropped its trailer," he tells Red Alert. The culprit is John Krasinski's *If*, about a young girl's real – but not terrifying – imaginary friend. The two similarly-premised movies are due to reach cinemas within months of each other, but Wadlow's not worried.

"It's like *Volcano* and *Dante's Peak*," he says. "There's an interesting Hollywood history of zeitgeisty movies hitting cinemas at the same time. [Imaginary friends] was one of those things that just hadn't been exploited in pop culture in a long time, probably not since *Drop Dead Fred*. So it was bound to happen."

Indeed, when Wadlow first had the idea for *Imaginary*, he was simply focused on making "a scary movie about an imaginary friend" with writers Greg Erb and Jason Oremland. "I'm really interested as a filmmaker in the idea of subjectivity," Wadlow explains. "Like, just because I show you something, why does that make it real? I like the idea of playing with an audience's perception of reality."

Erb and Oremland added another ingredient to the mix: an evil teddy bear. "I started taking those two ideas and wrapping them together and coming up with different characters and scenarios," Wadlow continues. "I was also thinking, 'What is a Blumhouse movie?' That led us to the idea of the home and a family trauma and we wrote it together, the three of us just riffing."

The result is *Imaginary*, in which a mother, played by *Jurassic World: Dominion*'s DeWanda Wise, returns to her childhood home and discovers her long-forgotten teddy bear. Her stepdaughter, Alice, portrayed by newcomer Pyper Braun, becomes infatuated with the bear, but it quickly becomes apparent that something haunts the stuffed animal, as Alice starts to play games that grow more and more sinister.

"The original *Poltergeist* was a major touchstone for us," Wadlow says. "It perfectly strikes the balance between scares and this benign sense of wonder and excitement and emotion that you get when you have a family that you care about. We try to do a modern-day version of that with our film, where the terror is coming from this unknown presence that has infected the safety of the family home. We also tried to lean into the Spielbergian aspects of that. What if this thing that you've always imagined was actually real? What would be the upside of that? We try to explore it with a modern sensibility."

Pyper Braun as Alice, with her not-so-friendly bear.

Other touchstones include Blumhouse's own *Sinister* franchise, "for the way it uses the parents" and children, as well as *M3GAN*, "because you have an antagonist with a real point of view," and *Happy Death Day*. Wadlow also wants to stress that *Imaginary* is a unique offering within the studio's stable and is keen to point out that the film's horrors run deeper than an evil teddy bear.

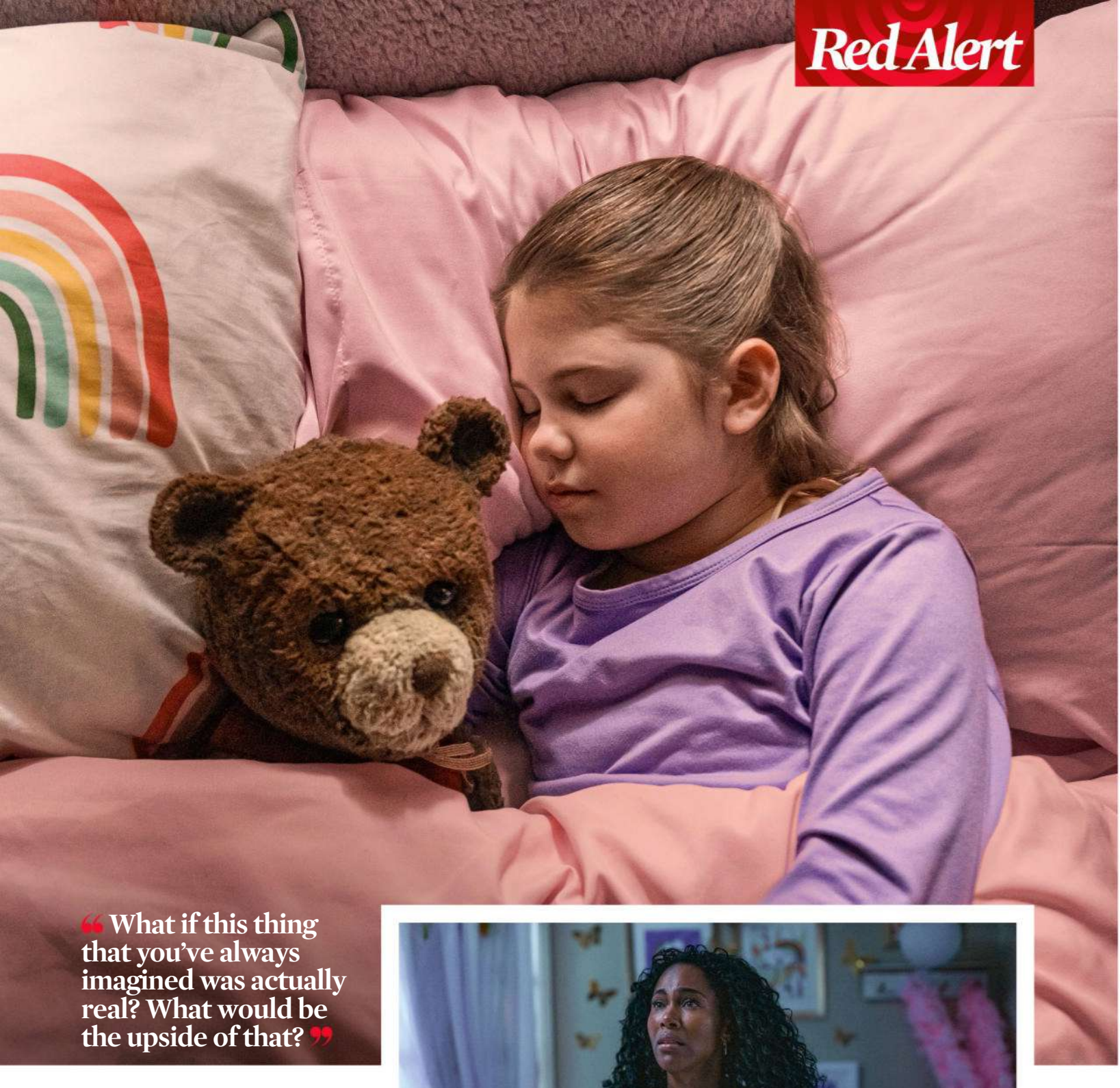
"We've taken this thing that you're aware of, imaginary friends, and we're not breaking the rules of what they are, but we're digging deeper, offering a different perspective," he says. "That's what we had to figure out, and it had to make sense, but we also had to tell an exciting, scary, emotional story that didn't get bogged down with exposition."

Anchoring everything are two surprising central performances. Wise's character is "neither a final girl nor Ripley from *Aliens*, she really stands on its own two feet," while Braun is next level: "She's like a young Drew Barrymore, young Jodie Foster, young Dakota Fanning level of talent.

"We saw every little girl who could play this part, and I didn't think we were going to find an actress who could pull this off. Then Piper walked through the door and knocked my socks off."

Should *Imaginary* be a success, there may be more to come. "We certainly planted some seeds that allow us to tell more stories about these characters," Wadlow says.

DeWanda Wise plays Alice's stepmother Jessica.



“What if this thing that you’ve always imagined was actually real? What would be the upside of that?”

But before that can happen, the film needs to fight off that other imaginary friends movie at the box office. Or perhaps this will be another Barbenheimer situation, where two films help each other out?

“It’s funny, I would kill to talk to Krasinski about it right now,” Wadlow says. “I’m sure we don’t even show up on his radar. He’s had so much success with the *A Quiet Place* franchise. I do wonder what they thought when they saw our trailer...”

Imaginary is in cinemas from 8 March.

Looks like everything’s going swimmingly.

SCI-FACT! **Wadlow modelled his career after director Richard Donner and his ability to direct both fun (*Superman*) and horror (*The Omen*).**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Dead And Loving It

Lisa Frankenstein writer Diablo Cody mines her teenage years to bring twisted teen lovers to life WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, DIRECTOR Karyn Kusama and BAFTA- and Academy Award-winning screenwriter Diablo Cody disrupted the horror genre with their gory feminist romp *Jennifer's Body*. On release, many audiences didn't quite get the humour and subtext of their revenge fantasy starring Megan Fox. But in the years since, critics have re-evaluated the film as being delightfully subversive and underappreciated.

Now Cody has circled back to the genre with her original screenplay *Lisa Frankenstein*. Essentially a love letter to her goth youth in the '80s, Cody's script fuses together the DNA of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with Tim Burton's oeuvre and a sprinkling of David Lynch's *Wild At Heart*.

Cody tells Red Alert that the idea for *Lisa Frankenstein* was born out of the lockdowns of the pandemic. She had spent years working on the book for the Alanis Morissette musical *Jagged Little Pill*, and then life crushed their efforts. "The show opened on Broadway in December 2019 and then proceeded to shut down immediately due to the pandemic," she sighs.

"So I'm sitting at home. I have three kids. At the time, I had a pretty fresh divorce and I didn't really know what to do with myself. I went into Mary Shelley mode where I was feeling pretty goth. I started to write this script solely to occupy myself and to take my mind off things. I just thought Gen Z needs their *Edward Scissorhands*."

Cinematographer Paula Huidobro and director Zelda Williams on set.

The story centres on the semi-tragic tale of teen misfit Lisa Swallows (Kathryn Newton). After the death of her mother, Lisa's life spirals when her dad quickly remarries a terrible woman (played by Carla Gugino), who labels her stepdaughter a screw-up. Lisa retreats into her fantasy life, mooning over romantic headstones in the graveyard, until a lightning storm suddenly brings her fantasy man (Cole Sprouse) to morbid life.

Entirely aware that the script would not be an easy sell, Cody found the right collaborator for it when a friend introduced her to up-and-coming filmmaker Zelda Williams, daughter of the late comedian Robin. "I was familiar with her work," she says. "I had seen things she had directed, like her short films. There was just something about her vibe and

Cole Sprouse and Kathryn Newton play the couple.

> **Kathryn brought theatrical elements to the character that I had never even envisioned**

her sensibility that I thought, 'I think this is going to work.'"

Universal greenlit the film, with Williams making her theatrical directorial debut. "She was ready to go," Cody says of Williams's enthusiasm. "She reminded me of Karyn Kusama in that way, a real hit-the-ground-running kind of director, and I thought, 'Let's do this!'"

Cody signed up as a producer on the film but she happily gave her script over to Williams's vision. "I love working with directors in general. Many screenwriters do not feel this way, but I enjoy entrusting a script into the hands of the director and seeing what they do with it. Because when they elevate the material, that's the best, because I could possibly be credited for this brilliant decision that I had nothing to do with," she laughs.

Spending time in New Orleans during production, Cody says she was particularly happy with the casting of Newton and Sprouse, as Lisa and her paramour respectively.

"Both of them were almost giving these silent film performances that I really enjoyed," Cody says. "Kathryn brought theatrical elements to the character that I had never even envisioned, and it's so amazing to me. She reminds me of an old movie star with her body language.

"I was very excited when I heard Cole was going to play the role," she continues. "I thought it would be very difficult to cast simply because I know from experience that actors want more lines. Not *none*. Every actor I've ever worked with has begged me for a monologue.

"But Cole was so onboard, taking mime lessons and doing mask work. He was excited about the possibility of giving that performance. I feel like he totally embodies that perfect, silent, romantic man of our dreams."

With a monster at her side, Lisa gains the confidence to viciously go after those who have made her life miserable. "The thing I love about Lisa is that Lisa is not just a victim, or someone who is grieving," Cody says of her alternative heroine.

"She also has an arrogance to her that is charming. She certainly sees herself as a victim, frequently, and so she is self-sabotaging in a lot of ways."

Cody hopes that audiences embrace her soulmate freaks like she has. "I even have a movie [prop] headstone in my front yard now," she laughs. "Everybody thinks I have a relative buried in front of my house. I love it!"

Lisa Frankenstein is in cinemas from 22 March.

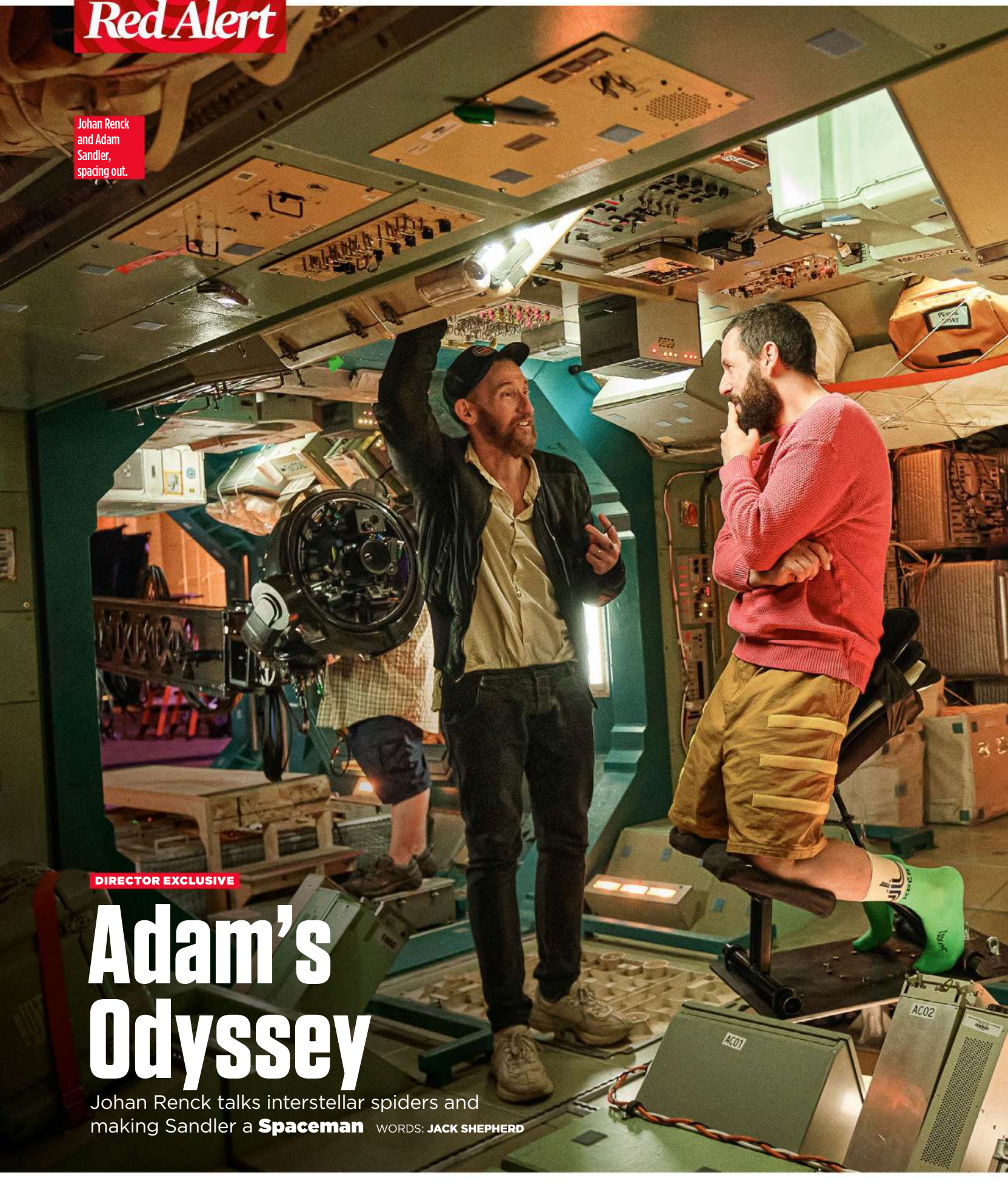
SCI-FACT! ***Riverdale*** **fans should recognise Cole Sprouse from his seven-season run as Jughead Jones.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- **Star Trek** boldly rewinding with a new big-screen prequel, directed by *Andor*'s Toby Haynes.
- Danny Boyle and Alex Garland reuniting on **28 Years Later**.
- Aneurin Barnard, Hayley Atwell and Jack Lowden leading Duncan Jones's animated **Rogue Trooper**.
- *The Ritual*'s David Bruckner remaking **The Blob**.
- Christian Bale to star in Maggie Gyllenhaal's *The Bride Of Frankenstein* remake **The Bride**.
- Gillian Anderson joining **TRON: Ares**.

- Jon Favreau directs new *Star Wars* movie **The Mandalorian & Grogu**.
- Original *Jurassic Park* screenwriter David Koepp penning next **Jurassic World** instalment.
- Nick Frost joining live-action **How To Train Your Dragon**.
- Director David Gordon Green exiting sequel **The Exorcist: Deceiver**.
- Ryan Coogler and Michael B Jordan reteaming for untitled historical vampire thriller.
- Domhnall Gleeson, John Krasinski and Natalie Portman in Guy Ritchie's **Fountain Of Youth**.

SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE/GETTY



Johan Renck and Adam Sandler, spacing out.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Adam's Odyssey

Johan Renck talks interstellar spiders and making Sandler a **Spaceman**

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

Jakub Procházka (Sandler): all alone.

AFTER EVERY MAJOR PROJECT, JOHAN Renck, the director behind some of the best episodes of *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead* and *Vikings*, found himself wandering the streets of Brooklyn, telling himself "I'm never going to do this again." In fact, after helming every episode in the Emmy-winning series *Chernobyl*, he planned on either opening a restaurant or becoming a gardener. But then he read the script for an adaptation of *Spaceman Of Bohemia*, a 2017 novel by Czech-born author Jaroslav Kalfař, and decided to park his alternate career plans.

"I read it and I'm like, 'Oh, shit', because it was so evident that I had to do this movie, it was very biographical for me," he tells Red Alert. In the main character Jakub Procházka – an astronaut on a one-man mission to collect samples of dust from a mysterious purple cloud that has appeared near Jupiter – Renck saw a younger version of himself, back when he was willing to do anything to achieve his ambitions, even at the expense of his personal life.

"It felt like atonement to do a film in which I go into some aspects of my undoing," he says. "A lot of people can relate to that. We're all thrust into this idea of ambition and reaching the next level of progress. But these are not things that are part of the nature of our universe."

SPIDERS FROM JUPITER

In the film, retitled *Spaceman*, Procházka – played by Adam Sandler, in his first non-comedy role since *Uncut Gems* – struggles with loneliness during his lengthy outer-space flight. His wife (Carey Mulligan) decides to leave him, but Procházka doesn't know; Ground Control decides against sending her pre-recorded break-up message to him.

As he gets closer to Jupiter, Procházka grows more and more desperate to hear his wife's voice, but instead, something very strange happens: a gigantic interstellar arachnid named Hanuš (voiced by Paul Dano) appears before him. It's as trippy as it sounds, but as with all good science fiction, the high concept is used to explore very relatable feelings of isolation and regret.

"When it comes to the human experience, how characters manifest, their psychology and behaviour, it has to be tremendously authentic," Renck says. "At the same time, I'm an escapist, and as a filmmaker, I have a lot of leniency to enhance our world. I love giving a lot of room when it comes to an enhanced reality because I want to be intrigued. I love the aspect of world-building."

The world-building in *Spaceman* sets it apart from many other voyages of intergalactic discovery; there are some science fiction gizmos, such as a device that's capable of making lag-free video calls from Earth to Jupiter, but they feel grounded because of Renck's attention to detail. His team looked into quantum and string theory to rationalise how such a device could work. They also went through the same type of process designing Procházka's ship.

"I very much dislike modern, sleek, looking-like-an-Apple-product sci-fi," Renck says. He praises production designer Jan Houllevigue, who he previously worked with on the miniseries *The Last Panthers*, as well as the music videos for David Bowie's "Blackstar" and "Lazurus", for creating an aesthetic that has a mechanical, '80s-esque, yet still modern look. It gives the film a unique tone... but is certainly not as bizarre as the design of Hanuš.

"We had a clue in the novel about what he looked like, as this creature is described as a spider, but it's way more impressionistic, as it has 20 eyes – 'The eyes on my grandfather, the eyes of my mother' – and it's completely not translatable," Renck says. "But I loved one of the details in the description, which was that it had a very human mouth. It was one of the first things we decided upon, this human mouth with human teeth."

> **"I very much dislike modern, sleek, looking-like-an-Apple-product sci-fi"**

Renck ended up with hundreds of design concepts, deciding on one where the spider moves its frontal pedipalps to reveal a human mouth. It's a disconcerting look, and one that makes us unsure whether Hanuš is real or a figment of Procházka's imagination. That, Renck says, is entirely the point of *Spaceman*. The film – which becomes especially strange as Procházka approaches his final destination – leaves many questions unanswered.

"We have that liberty in filmmaking," he says. "Its impressionism leaves it in the eye of the beholder. Like, my production designer, his take is that none of it happened. This is all a guy sitting in an apartment, his wife left him, and he's so fucking depressed that he invents all this world around him as he's processing the fact he fucked up his marriage. And I'm like, 'Good on you, mate.' I'm happy with that."

Spaceman is on Netflix from 1 March.

Hanuš the space spider imparts words of wisdom.

Jakub with his wife (Carey Mulligan) in better days.

SCI-FACT! **Having dropped out of a series spin-off of *Dune*, Renck will next adapt *The Day Of The Triffids* for television.**

SCI-FACT! Solomon Kane first appeared in the short story "Red Shadows" in the August 1928 issue of *Weird Tales*.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Brutal Blades

Savage Sword Of Conan returns in all its black and white glory WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER THE SUCCESS OF *CONAN THE Barbarian*, Titan Comics and Heroic Signatures are now reviving its black and white companion title, *Savage Sword Of Conan*. Described by *Conan The Barbarian* writer Jim Zub as "the premier magazine for bold sword and sorcery comics from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s", the bi-monthly anthology will feature a selection of comics and prose stories.

"At its height, *Savage Sword Of Conan* reached a massive audience hungry for amazing art and uncompromising pulp-fuelled storytelling," says Zub, whose short fiction piece "Sacrifice In The Sand" is inspired by Joe Jusko's cover. "It's essentially a nasty extended combat sequence as Conan brings his brutality to bear on a set of skilled Stygian soldiers who are escorting a prisoner through the desert."

Scripted by John Arcudi and illustrated by Max Von Fafner, the self-contained "Conan And The Dragon Horde" forces the Cimmerian to choose between the comforts of wealth and battling an ancient monster. "Conan is now leading a mercenary army against a walled city that has more than just walls protecting it," explains Arcudi. "He doesn't trust the man who has hired him, but he's not going to let a crappy boss keep him from getting paid – although he may wish he had."

"I've a lot of experience with these topics. Because of John's story I had to develop new page layouts and push the boundaries," adds Von Fafner. "The challenge was to paint fantasy into reality, and I had to develop new skills on the fly, as it's a very challenging story."

Written and drawn by Patrick "Patch" Zircher, *Savage Sword* also sees the return of another of Robert E Howard's famous anti-heroes, 17th century Puritan Solomon Kane. "I'm a big fan of Conan, Kull, El Borak and all the characters Robert E Howard created, but Solomon Kane was my first choice, so it was an opportunity to work with a character I've enjoyed all my life," says Zircher, who drew Conan as a member of Marvel's Savage Avengers.

"Kane embodies what I love about heroes: he's stoic, a wanderer and brave with a code of honour, combatting the wicked and the supernatural. Stylistically, Kane is the man in black, cloaked, cold, lean, intelligent, a swordsman and a marksman, and he's a blueprint in one way or another for the Shadow, the Witcher, Van Helsing as portrayed by Hugh Jackman, Hammer films' Captain Kronos and Michael Moorcock's Elric.

"Kane is a model for dark, sorcerous heroes and occultic adventurers, and that his stories take place in the age of musketeers, Barbary pirates, sultans and inquisitions makes it as rich and detailed as any fantasy world."

Finally, the three-part "Master Of The Hunt" takes place at Halloween. "In legend, All Hallow's Eve is a time of both pagan and ancient Christian belief when the barrier between worlds is at its weakest," teases Zircher. "This plays into our tale as Solomon Kane travels the wilds of 16th century Wales. Something gets through this barrier and Kane must confront it..."

Savage Sword Of Conan issue one is out on 28 February.

Inside page. Main pic: cover art by Joe Jusko.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Tangled Web

Peter Parker and Miles Morales are partners in crimefighting in **Spectacular Spider-Men**

AFTER CREATING animated series *Spectacular Spider-Man*, Greg Weisman is now delving into the wall-crawler's comic book adventures. And as if one Web-head wasn't enough, *The Spectacular Spider-Men* pairs Peter Parker with Miles Morales for their first monthly title team-up.

"It's always nice to have someone for your lead to talk to, and if you have two equal leads, as we have in *Spectacular Spider-Men*, then the job is done for you," Weisman tells Red Alert. "You play the dynamics between the characters, testing them under different circumstances and challenges."

Along with Brian Michael Bendis and Sara Pichelli's original 2012 series *Spider-Men*, Weisman has taken inspiration from the classic Spidey-starring *Marvel Team-Up* and the Thing-centred *Marvel Two-In-One*. "I'm sure books like *Team-Up* and *Two-In-One* are swimming in my head, and I've read the previous *Spider-Men* series," says Weisman, who says that he's adopted a more fluid approach.

"With this being ongoing, the biggest difference is that I'm planting seeds, hoping that the book is successful enough to last a good long time, so that some of those seeds will have time to flower," he explains. "Not everything needs to be completely contained."

With former Ultimate Universe resident Miles having shifted across to Marvel's core 616 universe after 2017's *Spider-Men II*, Weisman is also moving his relationship with Peter to the next level, progressing the pair beyond their original statuses as mentor and protégé and evolving them into being just good mates.

"I've had mentors in my life, and I've mentored people as well, which is a wonderful thing generally but at some point, the best of these relationships mature into friendships," he says. "A protégé should outgrow the need for constant mentoring, although it doesn't mean that a friend can't offer advice. But things must evolve, and it's high time for Miles and Peter to evolve. It's definitely what Peter is after here, and something that Miles can appreciate too."

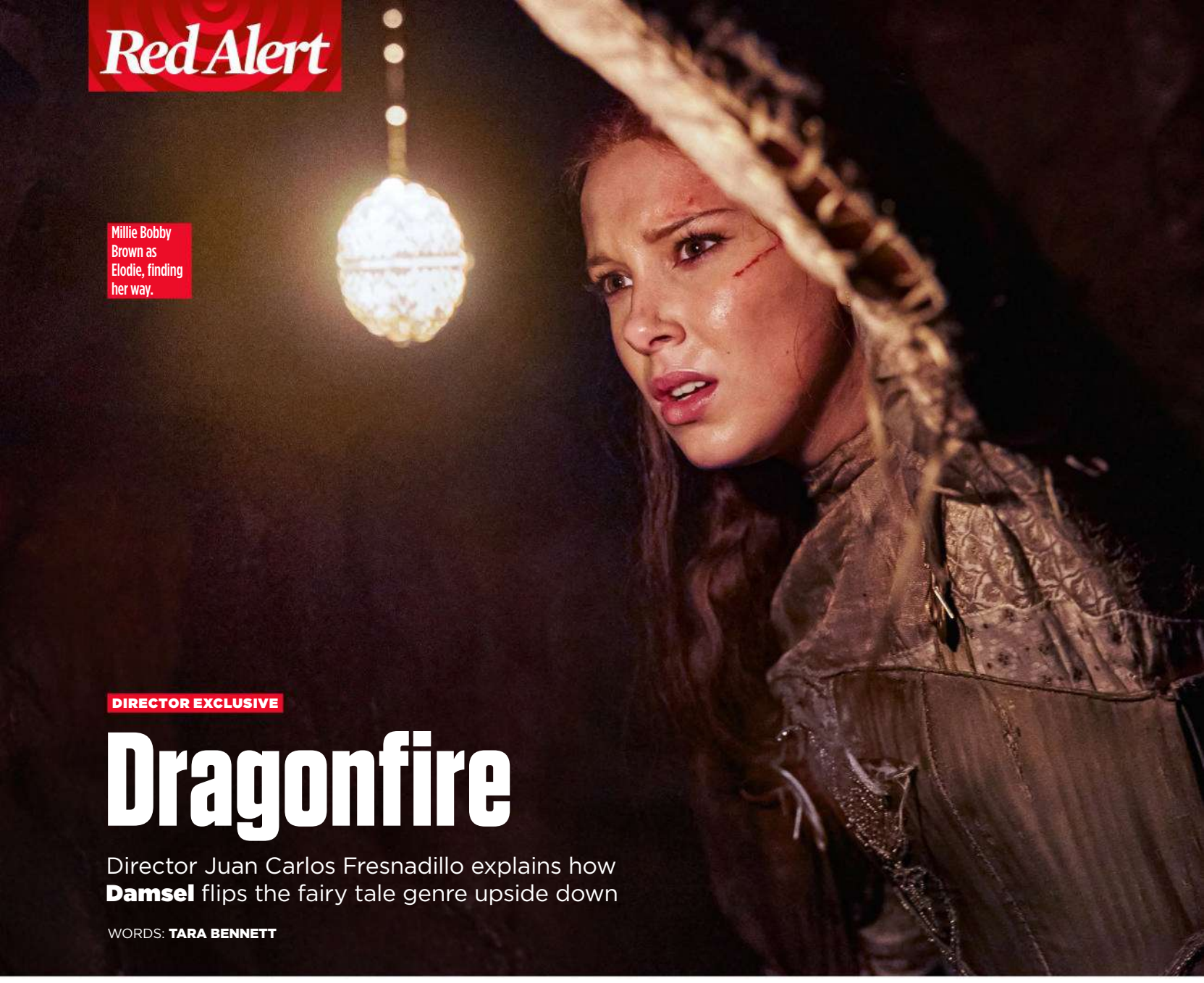
While there are some familiar faces, *Spectacular Spider-Men* features its own supporting cast, which differs from both *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*. "It'll be made up of legacy and new characters," says Weisman, who will also develop his own subplots. "This isn't the main title for either Peter or Miles so we'll be breaking some new ground here, creating a space for the two of them, independent of the other Spider titles. But this is still the Marvel Universe, so we'll be in continuity."

Initially, the pair are pitted against the Jackal, although not embittered biologist Miles Warren as we've seen him before. "The Jackal previewed in the first issue isn't exactly the Jackal you know," teases Weisman. "We also have some cool surprises coming."

He's also enjoying working with artist Humberto Ramos. "More than anything, Humberto creates the illusion of movement in every single panel," he says. "And Spidey – whichever one – is a character that absolutely has to move!"

Spectacular Spider-Men issue one is out on 6 March.

SCI-FACT! **Weisman was offered *Spectacular Spider-Man* after editor Nick Lowe read some of his spin-off comics for *Gargoyles*.**



Millie Bobby Brown as Elodie, finding her way.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Dragonfire

Director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo explains how **Damsel** flips the fairy tale genre upside down

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

ASK SOMEONE TO CITE A favourite fairy tale these days, and most people immediately think of a Disney-fied version of a classic like *Cinderella* – but when that story was first published in France in the 17th century, it was rather different. Before they evolved, spreading around the globe, these cultural cautionary tales were often sexual, violent and very weird.

We have the Brothers Grimm to blame for sanitising many fairy tales to make them more digestible for children; they're also often sexist, with inert princesses being saved by heroic princes. However, Netflix's *Damsel*, executive-produced by and starring *Stranger Things*' Millie Bobby Brown as Princess Elodie, is a refreshing return to fairy tales rife with dark themes, violence and human behaviour that's worse than anything seen from monsters.

Directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo (*28 Weeks Later*) from an original story by Dan Mazeau (*Wrath Of The Titans*), *Damsel* takes all of the typical tropes inherent to today's princess-centric fairy tales – glorious castles, lush costumes, charming suitors and happily-ever-afters – and remixes them into a story told from the female point of view, one which inverts all expectations.

"*Damsel* is a full revision of fairy tales," Fresnadillo tells Red Alert. "That was something that I felt was so attractive, especially because it introduces a very modern and contemporary way, with new values in these kinds of stories."

In an ancient time of magic, Elodie (Brown) is the eldest daughter in a depressed country, low on food and resources. Desperate to avoid his people starving to death, the King (Ray Winstone) and his new wife, Lady Bayford (Angela Bassett), heed the call of a distant land where Queen Isabelle (Robin Wright) is ready to provide a generous dowry in exchange for a princess to marry her son, Prince Henry (Nick Robinson).

Less than pleased about this but loyal to her people, Elodie agrees and departs with her

> **"We needed an actress that has the craft for delivering something that is really tricky"**

These folk keep a straight face at all times.

If you go down to the woods today... well, just don't.

Ray Winstone and Angela Bassett as the Bayfords.

family, including her beloved little sister Floria (Brooke Carter), to wed the Prince, then stay and rule. The sparkling kingdom initially bewitches everyone, but the secret residing in the local mountain will upend Elodie's entire worldview. What follows sends Elodie on a journey to discover her potential as she battles for her life.

It's a character that required the emotional skillsets which Brown has shown in spades playing Eleven for four seasons. "We needed an actress that has the craft for delivering something that is really, *really* tricky and difficult in this revision, which is the survival journey," Fresnadillo explains.

"At the end of the day, this movie is about a girl who becomes a woman," he continues. "Millie is in that moment of her life where she's experiencing that transformation. She was really good at putting in the character probably many things that she's going through now.

"Then she takes you into that journey and makes you feel what she's experiencing. Only great actors are capable of dragging you in, and making you feel that you're with them, suffering, sweating, fighting. She's fantastic. We were very lucky to have her because she's not only capable to do that kind of physical part, but she's really sensible about the nuances and the subtle details in the story too."

The director extends his praise to the rest of the cast, including Bassett, whom he says reinvents the traditional "evil stepmother" into someone with a good cause, as she is the first to see the "shadows of this kingdom" and has great concern for Elodie.

"*Damsel* embraces the fact that women are supportive of women," says Fresnadillo. "It's a unique take, and in order to do that, you need the complicity of all [the actors]. They understood really well the compassion, because at the end of the day, there is no story if you don't have an emotional journey."

That also applies to the dragon teased in the trailer as Elodie's antagonist, which the director says is a fully-realised character that has its own arc, one which dovetails with the film's themes of compassion and mercy.

When it comes to the dragon's design, on which Fresnadillo collaborated with production designer Patrick Tatopoulos (*Underworld*), he say they looked back on the pantheon of dragons in the history of cinema.

"The dragon is a legendary figure, and you want to deliver something really matching with this new [story] evolution," he says. "When you're designing fantasy stories, you ask, 'What is the emotion that [ties] the whole thing together?' In a very emotional way, this is a family drama, and is also a family drama for the dragon."

Damsel is on Netflix from 8 March.

SCI-FACT! **A YA novel of *Damsel* by Evelyn Skye, based on an early draft screenplay, was published last year.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Mrs Peel, we're needed! StudioCanal rebooting '60s spy-fi classic **The Avengers**.

→ John Boyega to star in and produce TV prequel series to 2010's **The Book Of Eli**.

→ Wilson Bethel reprising uber-assassin Bullseye in **Daredevil: Born Again**.

→ *The Sinner*'s Derek Simonds replacing Sam Esmail as showrunner of the **Battlestar Galactica** reboot.

→ Selena Gomez to star in revival of **Wizards Of Waverly Place**.

→ Wendy and Richard Pini's **Elfquest** comics to be adapted as an animated series.

→ Netflix making a fourth **Fear Street** movie, based on RL Stine's *The Prom Queen*.

→ Paramount+ cancelling Sarah Michelle Gellar's **Wolf Pack** after just one season.

→ Kaitlyn Dever to star as Abby Anderson in season two of **The Last Of Us**.

→ Netflix abandoning work on Halle Berry's SF thriller **The Mothership**.

→ Greg Nicotero to bring Robert McCammon's horror novel **Swan Song** to TV.

→ Jared Abrahamson joining **The Penguin**.

MICHAEL BUCKNER/GOLDEN GLOBES/GETTY

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Doctor New

Prepare for admittance to **The Second Best Hospital In The Galaxy** with series creator Cirocco Dunlap WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

WHAT'S BEEN MISSING FROM THE genre landscape? How about a horny, female-centric, adult animated series featuring hardcore SF storylines and *Grey's Anatomy*-esque personal dramas, with a surreal aesthetic that's somewhere between *Scavengers Reign* and *The Fifth Element*? If that sounds like your kind of weird, get ready to check into Prime Video's *The Second Best Hospital In The Galaxy*.

Created by writer Cirocco Dunlap (*Russian Doll*), *The Second Best Hospital In The Galaxy* is essentially a mash-up of the real-life topics and influential shows rattling around inside her noggin. "I love sci-fi and anything with weird genre stuff," Dunlap tells Red Alert. "And I love comedy and animation. I thought this seems like a really fun place to put a whole lot of ideas that are pretty disparate into a world where they can all live."

Originally pitching it in 2019, Dunlap developed an animated comedy, set in 14002, at an intergalactic hospital where renowned surgeons Dr Sleech (Stephanie Hsu) and Dr Klak (Keke Palmer) save the lives of myriad aliens in *very* unconventional ways. The show intentionally throws audiences into a high concept world where there are no humans, and the species featured have bizarre biology and inherent abilities. It's deep end sci-fi, yet the personal problems facing the doctor/besties are entirely relatable.

"As a fan of sci-fi, I prefer the things that don't hold your hand as much," Dunlap says of her choice to make audiences work to acclimate to the world of Sleech and Klak. "But it's always that fine line, because I want this show to be accessible. I feel like a lot of sci-fi is alienating. It's male. Some people really like that very hard sci-fi. But personally, I am drawn to the things that are more character-based and so I wanted this to be welcoming."

Through the deep friendship between Sleech and Klak, the mundane and profane get showcased as they goad one another to overcome their personal issues while navigating around the hospital's eclectic staff of other alien healers, including empath Dr Plowp (Kieran Culkin), ancient being Dr Vlam (Maya Rudolph) and salty Nurse Tup (Natasha Lyonne).

"It was such a hard show to write because you've got the hospital idea, you've got

Dr Klak (Keke Palmer) and Dr Sleech (Stephanie Hsu).

Russian Doll's Natasha Lyonne voices Nurse Tup.

Dr Azel (Sam Smith) does a bit of rummaging.

The ancient Dr Vlam (left) is voiced by Maya Rudolph.

the sci-fi on top of it, but then you want something that feels emotionally relevant," Dunlap says. "Every single episode was a learning curve."

Dunlap says that the freedom of the genre and the lack of human rules for her characters opened the door for her imagination to run wild, with ideas you'd never get in any other series. "There's an episode in season one about getting a sexually transmitted infection, where you turn into the last person that you slept with," she laughs. "So I was trying really hard to find [ideas] that were cool, *and* make me uneasy in some way."

Through Sleech and Klak, Dunlap also gets to work through real world issues like debilitating anxiety (which she has experienced), professional ennui and the challenge of connecting. "I knew it was a two-hander from the get-go because I really love female friendships," Dunlaps explains. "I really liked the idea that they're very competent. They love each other and they're always kind to each other, but they do call each other out."

Dunlap says the series has a "case of the week" structure, but Sleech and Klak will have complex histories revealed throughout the first two seasons.

"What's nice is that Klak's season is season one, and in season two, it's Sleech's," she says of their arcs. "It was nice being able to produce season one knowing Sleech's backstory will be in there, because she's much more secretive.

"Those things – just in terms of world-building – really inform who the characters are. Even though this is sci-fi, it's also about distant moms or challenging moms or mentally ill moms or whatever the issues are," she jokes.

The series also embodies the signature alien art style of Robin Eisenberg, who serves as the production designer. All the characters are drawn with odd details and bold colours, which means every frame holds something visually strange.

"I just really liked the idea of pretty sci-fi, and it's got a female gaze thing," Dunlaps says of the look of the show. "I love the colours, and our artists are really incredibly talented. There are many beautiful [animated] shows now, but so many do fall victim to being the great grandsons of *The Simpsons*.

"We wanted something that looks different. And I wanted it to be beautiful, but also wanted it to be funny when it all explodes," she laughs. Which it most certainly will...

The Second Best Hospital In The Galaxy is on Prime Video from 23 February.

SCI-FACT! Cirocco Dunlap says that a drive-in rewatch of *The Fifth Element* inspired all of the clothing featured in the series.

SCI-FACT! **Stories Gage re-read for research include *Wolverine: Origins*, *Earth X*, *Old Man Logan* and parts of "Age Of Apocalypse".**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Logan's Run

Christos Gage assembles a dirty half-dozen of Wolverines for **Weapon X-Men**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

One of many variant covers, by Nick Bradshaw.

SPINNING OUT OF THE RECENT *Original X-Men* one-shot, *Weapon X-Men* sees Phoenix bringing together a team of Wolverines from parallel dimensions – dubbed "the band of Logans" by writer Christos Gage – to continue the fight against the multiversal menace of an alternate Onslaught, an unholy combination of the dark sides of Magneto and another incarnation of the erstwhile Marvel Girl.

"It's interesting to see how many varied types of characters there can be who are also the same person," Gage tells Red Alert. "We've got two from very different dystopian worlds, one from the early 1900s, one who's kind of let himself go, and one who's undead, so they're pretty varied. But there are also universal similarities such as the claws and the attitude.

"The versions of Wolverine weren't selected to reflect anything in particular, except that I wanted there to be an element of suspicion and mistrust among them – each of them has a reason their teammates might not feel able to count on them fully."

CRYING WOLVES

Specifically, the Yildiray Çinar-illustrated four-parter features Wolvies from the Age Of Apocalypse, Earth X, Old Man Logan and Marvel Zombies. "I picked 'damaged' Wolverines, although with Logan that comes with the territory!" laughs Gage. "Here we're talking about one who in Weapon X from Age Of Apocalypse is literally damaged as he's missing a hand; one who is old, overweight and has a reduced healing factor in Earth X; one who has the mother of all traumatic pasts in Old Man; and one who's actually dead in Zombie Wolverine.

"So the damage is probably ramped up some with this bunch, even for Wolverines! The Logans will also be running across an alternate Wolverine who seems to have his life pretty well together, which is kind of a gut-check for the likes of Earth X and Old Man."

Described by Gage as "inexperienced by Wolverine's standards", there's also Jane Howlett of Earth-2181 – a brand new gender-flipped version of the character. "I was thinking of how to make her more different to the other grizzled old Logans, and I realised that if the child born to Elizabeth Howlett in Alberta in the late 1880s was a girl, especially when you go back over a century to a more restrictive time, it affects the dynamics of how the origin story we know for Wolverine might have unfolded," continues Gage.

While insisting that he "didn't want to retread old ground," Gage also draws on Logan's romantic feelings for Jean Grey. "While the Jean/Logan relationship influences the character dynamics, it's not going to be a rehash of the Wolverine/Jean/Cyclops love triangle," he says. "And let's not forget that Wolverine has other lost loves like Mariko. Any part of his past is fair game, which is the fun of a book like this."

Weapon X-Men issue one is out on 6 March.

Variant cover art for issue one, by Veronica Fish.

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Sandmen

Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson complete their comic book trilogy with **Dune: House Corrino**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

JUST AS THE SECOND part of Denis Villeneuve's big-screen adaptation of Frank Herbert's classic 1965 novel arrives in cinemas, Boom! Studios is releasing *Dune: House Corrino*, the final volume in Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson's comic book version of their prequel.

"We saw the original trilogy of novels as three separate books, but one big story," the authors tell Red Alert. "Because we think of our writing as very cinematic and visual, we've always imagined this trilogy would work very well in the comics medium, but it's a very big epic. Keeping the adaptation as three separate series – *House Atreides*, *House Harkonnen* and *House Corrino* – made it much more workable to produce."

Noting that "not everything can be carried forward," Herbert and Anderson say that turning their novels into eight, 33-page, oversized issues was a very similar process to producing a movie. "In selecting elements and storylines from the novels for comics, it's important to set priorities, to determine what is most visually adaptive to the comic book form, while still not losing the essence of the story," they say.

The pair add that they have emphasised the strong visual aspects of the planet of Arrakis. "A *Dune* story has many layers, including religion, philosophy and politics, which aren't easy to convey in comic format," they continue. "But the vast scope of Frank Herbert's *Dune* universe, the planetary landscapes, the immense sandworms and stunning Guild Heighliners really shine in the comics medium. We wish we had a lot more pages to work with so we could accommodate big panels and two-spreads, but we had to balance between the artistic spectacle and the multiple storylines and complex plotting."

With *House Corrino* leading up to the events of *Dune* itself, we can expect to see several familiar characters. "In *House Corrino*, Duke Leo Atreides and his concubine Lady Jessica, as well as their arch-enemies the evil Baron Harkonnen, Beast Rabban and Piter de Vries, are all caught up and manipulated by the schemes of Emperor Shaddam IV and his henchmen Count Fenring," explain Herbert and Anderson. "These alliances have been brewing for 24 monthly issues before the start of *House Corrino*, so prepare for a wild ride and a grand finale."

After artists Dev Pramanik and Mariano Taibo took on *House Atreides* and Michael Shelfer illustrated *House Harkonnen*, *House Corrino* is drawn by Simone Ragazzoni. "Over the course of the numerous issues of *House Atreides* and *House Harkonnen*, we've been able to see the work of several excellent artists who laid the creative groundwork, creating the look and feel of the characters, the costumes, the architecture and settings," say Herbert and Anderson. "Now Simone brings his own flair and imagination to the new series, building on what was established before.

> **"We saw the original trilogy of novels as being one big story"**

"Simone has a clever eye for layout and perspective that lets him convey the real scope of this big story while fitting all the plotlines in. We love how he portrays the action and emotional power of the pages."

Dune: House Corrino issue one is out on 20 March.

SCI-FACT! **The son of Frank Herbert, Brian Herbert has co-written several *Dune* series with Kevin J Anderson including the Caladan Trilogy.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Magic Number

3 Body Problem director Derek Tsang reveals how he adapted China's modern science fiction classic *The Three-Body Problem*

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

NEW SERIES *3 BODY Problem* marks the return of David Benioff and DB Weiss (aka D&D) to genre television after some down time following eight seasons of showrunning *Game Of Thrones*. It's also the first collaboration for the pair with executive producer Alexander Woo (*The Terror*).

More importantly for fans of contemporary sci-fi literature, this adaptation of Liu Cixin's Hugo and Nebula award-winning novel *The Three-Body Problem* is an opportunity for mainstream audiences to discover the book that put Chinese science fiction on international radars when it was translated into English in 2014.

"I don't think people realise how important this novel is for the Chinese, for China readers and Chinese sci-fi," Derek Tsang, the Hong Kong-based director of *3 Body Problem*, tells Red Alert. "This book was written in 2008, so it's been around for a long time. It's really well known in our part of the world because it's one of the first contemporary science fiction books that really broke out, reached a mass audience and let people look at Chinese science fiction."

Benioff, Weiss and Woo have adapted the text into a multi-generational, non-linear story that uses the dramatic life of Cultural Revolution survivor and brilliant astrophysicist Ye Wenjie (played by both Rosalind Chao and Zine Tseng) as the means by which to tell a sprawling story of political upheaval, "broken science" in contemporary London and even extraterrestrial communication. Featuring an international cast including Benedict Wong, Jovan Adepo, Eiza González and John Bradley, *3 Body Problem* honours the spirit and core beats of the book, but also opens it up for a broader audience.

As a long-time fan of Liu Cixin's original sci-fi trilogy, Tsang says he was excited to learn that Benioff and Weiss were adapting it into a series. But he never dreamed that he would eventually be a part of it. However, an Academy Award nomination for his film *Better Days* earned him a call about possibly directing for the show.

"My immediate reaction was, 'Hell, yeah! Let them know, I'm

Yang Hewen, with Zine Tseng as Ye Wenjie.

"Yes, it's great, but does it get Sky Sports?"

Eiza González as Auggie Salazar, of the Oxford Five.

John Bradley as Jack Rooney discovers a headset.

really interested in meeting them,'" Tsang remembers.

After a Zoom meeting with the creatives, Tsang was quickly hired to establish the look of the series in the first two episodes, which do the heavy lifting of establishing multiple eras, a contemporary murder mystery and a lot of characters.

"From my end, because it's such a genre-bending show, there's a lot of different elements that are involved," Tsang explains. "There's the history part of it that starts in China in the '60s, there's the present day and then there's the game that you see in the trailer. Blending it together in one seamless and organic whole, that was a big challenge."

The writers have essentially broken the first book into eight episodes, taking what Tsang says isn't "an easy read" and opening it up to create an ensemble piece that is more accessible. "The book is an epic story of people going through an existential threat," he explains. "But the human connections aren't as strong in the book, I would say.

"So D&D and Alex brought the characters together from a very early stage," he continues. "The [trilogy] reveals the characters much differently. But here, they take all of the important characters of the three books, put them all together and have them be connected already from the very beginning of the story."

> **"I don't think the audience will have seen anything like it"**

Tsang explains that in the series this new mixture of friends is called the "Oxford Five". "It's a credit to their adaptation that they're keeping the essence of the novel by making it even more international and on a more global scale," he says.

"That is the right approach, because this is an existential book. It's a cosmic story, so it makes every sense to involve as many people with different backgrounds and different ethnicities in the story."

Teasing the VR-like tech that will reveal itself to the ensemble, Tsang says cinematographer Jonathan Freeman built a 220-degree stage surrounded by thousands of LED panels to accomplish the unique look of the game (from which the original novel takes its title).

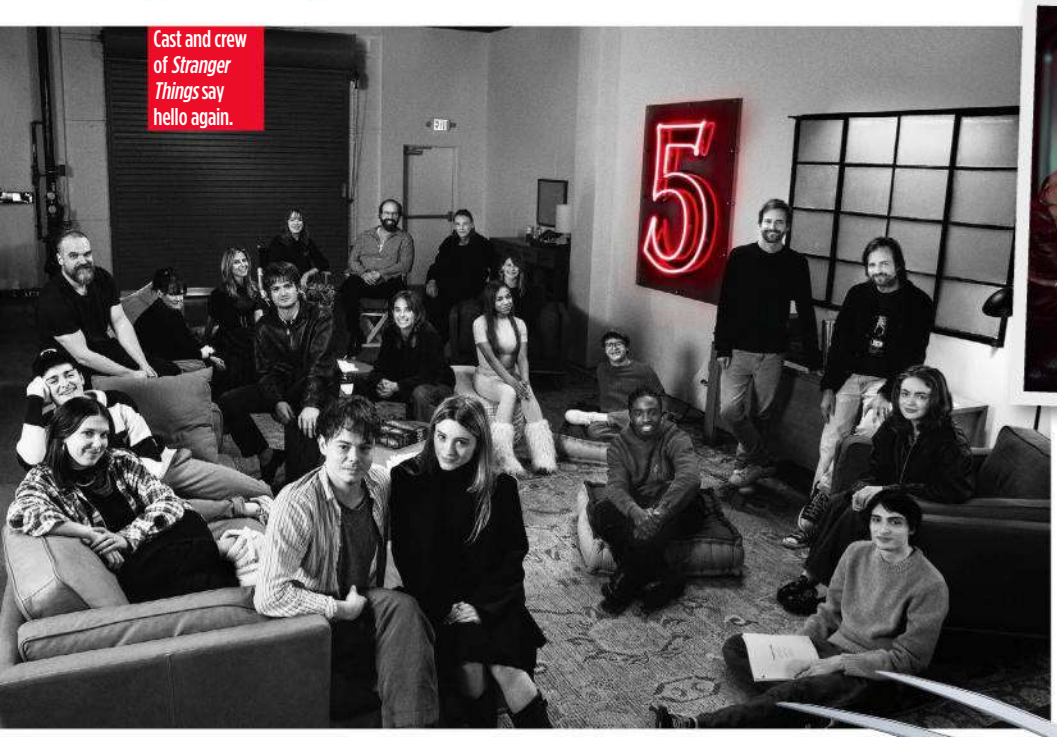
"[The game] is based on different ancient civilisations," he says. "As the game progresses along with the episodes, you see the setting changes from the Shang Dynasty in China, moving to different civilisations in different periods of time in history. There's three suns that move around in that genre-bending world for the game. I don't think the audience will have seen anything like it before."

Now they wait to see what both Chinese and global audiences think of their *3 Body Problem* take. "I'm very confident that they will like it," Tsang says.

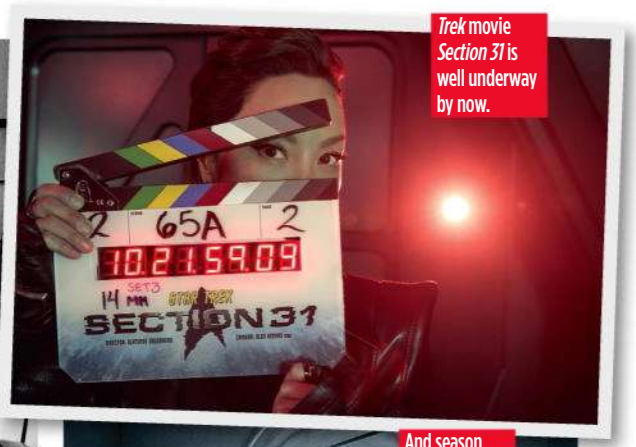
3 Body Problem is on Netflix from 21 March.

SCI-FACT! ***Game Of Thrones*** **author George RR Martin was an early, public advocate for** ***The Three-Body Problem*** **winning the Hugo Award.**

SCI-FACT! **A series set in the *Sandman* universe, *Dead Boy Detectives*, will be released on Netflix later this year.**



Cast and crew of *Stranger Things* say hello again.



Trek movie *Section 31* is well underway by now.

And season two of *The Sandman* is ready to rock.

IN PRODUCTION

Following the successful resolution of strikes in Hollywood, many of our favourite genre productions have resumed filming. The fifth and final season of Netflix's *Stranger Things* got underway in early January, while *Section 31*, Michelle Yeoh's *Star Trek* event movie for Paramount+, kicked off at the end of the month. Meanwhile, work on season two of *The Sandman* continues for Netflix. All three productions released first-look images to mark the occasion.

WORLD BUILDING

Universal Orlando has unveiled plans for its new theme park, Epic Universe, opening in 2025. Comprising five different lands, it will include *Super Nintendo World*, *How To Train Your Dragon: Isle Of Berk*, *The Wizarding World Of Harry Potter: Ministry Of Magic* and *Dark Universe*, the new home of Universal Monsters. Work also continues on a permanent Universal scare attraction in Las Vegas, *Horror Unleashed*.

FLYING HIGH

Are you really a blockbuster until you've been made out of building blocks? Fortunately the *Dune* Atreides Royal Ornithopter premium Lego set (available now, £149.99) arrives just in time for the second instalment. The detailed 1,369-piece model comes with eight mini-figures, including an inspired Baron Harkonnen. The wings extend and flap, while feet can be deployed for landing – should you want to risk those pesky sandworms...

Mathew McQuinn, Micah Balfour and Natalie Gumede guest star in *Goth Opera*.

Goth Opera's TARDIS team are all smiles.

The Fugitive Doctor figure. You know you need it!

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ Final 28-day figures for the 60th anniversary specials saw viewing numbers at 8.36M for "The Star Beast", 8.30M for "Wild Blue Yonder" and 7.91M for "The Giggle", ranking 10th, 4th and 6th for each week respectively. Final figures for "The Church On Ruby Road" were not available at time of going to press.

◆ **Filming for series two – due to air in 2025 – recently took place at Penarth's Pier Pavilion and the OK Diner in Leominster, Herefordshire, with Ncuti Gatwa and *Andor* actress Varada Sethu. *Radio Times* also reported that West End actor Lewis Cornay had been present for filming.**

◆ Character Options released a website exclusive set of Jo Martin as the Fugitive Doctor, with her TARDIS and gun. Demand crashed the website!

◆ **Prototypes of further figures from Character Options were on display at London's Toy Fair in January. These included the Fifteenth Doctor and Ruby Sunday in their costumes from "The Church On Ruby Road" and a Wrarth Warrior from "The Star Beast". A Fifteenth Doctor's sonic screwdriver and plush Meep were also spotted.**

Colin Baker with the cast of *The Quin Dilemma*.

◆ New releases from Big Finish have been announced for March. Jacob Dudman performs in *The Twelfth Doctor Chronicles: You Only Die Twice*, alongside Bhavnisha Parmar (who played Yaz's sister Sonya Khan) as companion Keira Sanstrom. The third part of *Sontarans Vs Rutans* sees Colin Baker's Sixth Doctor alongside India Fisher as Charley Pollard in *Born To Die*.

◆ **Marking 40 years of Colin Baker as the Sixth Doctor, a six-part box set, *The Quin Dilemma*, will also be released in March. It will reunite Baker with Nicola Bryant (Peri), Bonnie Langford (Mel), Miranda Raison (Constance) and Lisa Greenwood (Flip).**

◆ The *Doctor Who Novel Adaptations* return in July with *Goth Opera*. The Virgin Missing Adventure, published in 1993, has been adapted by Lizbeth Myles into a three-part audio play starring Peter Davison, Janet Fielding and Sarah Sutton.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer and Disney+.

SCI-FACT! Varada Sethu also appeared in Russell T Davies's 2016 adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

SCI-FACT! **Laurie Johnson's theme for *The Avengers* was a reworking of an earlier piece of his called "The Shake".**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

LAURIE JOHNSON 1927-2024

The man who made *The Avengers* swing

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

FOR *THE AVENGERS* PRODUCER Brian Clemens, the music of Laurie Johnson was "the final icing on the cake", a score that encapsulated all the panache and whimsy of the outlandish spy series.

Born in Hampstead, London, Johnson studied at the Royal College of Music, tutored by Ralph Vaughn Williams. He entered the entertainment industry in the '50s, arranging for the Ted Heath Band, before his first screen credit on 1957's *The Good Companions*.

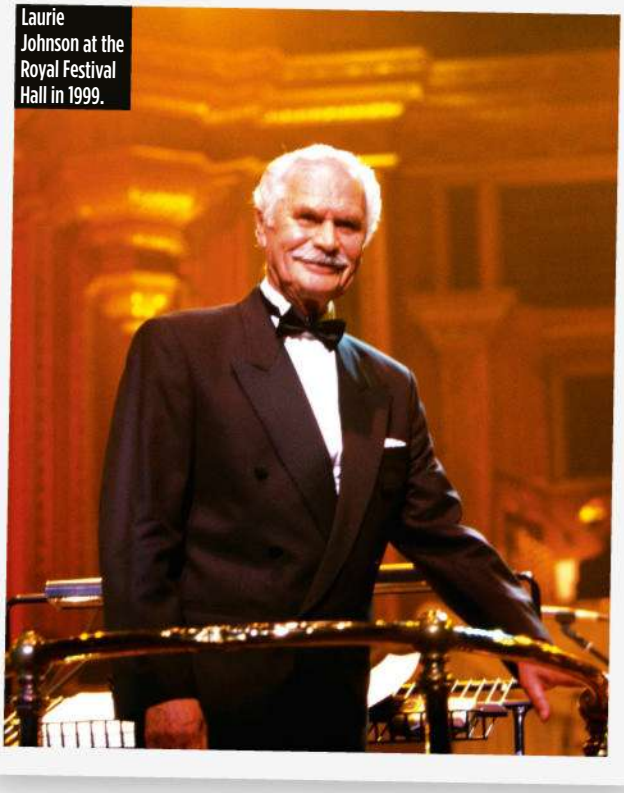
A prolific career as a composer encompassed big screen and small, from Stanley Kubrick's satiric Cold War masterpiece *Dr Strangelove* to *Animal Magic*, *Jason King* and *This Is Your Life*. "I used to call them musical visiting cards," he said of his contagiously memorable title themes. "The first five or ten seconds should furnish the room for the audience to walk into."

In 1964 producer Julian Wintle engaged Johnson to score *The Avengers*. The series was moving from videotape to glossy 35mm and needed a new musical identity to match its ambitions for the international market. "Laurie was an asset and the score was brilliant," said Roy Ward Baker, director of "The Town Of No Return", Diana Rigg's first episode as Emma Peel. "It was modern, it was jazzy, it was big and it was lush."

Johnson scored three seasons of *The Avengers* then partnered with producers Brian Clemens and Albert Fennell to create *The New Avengers* in 1976, giving it an urgent, decidedly funky signature theme in sync with the times.

Gritty cop show *The Professionals* followed in 1977, with its own gloriously adrenalised strut of a title tune. Hammer's *Captain Kronos – Vampire Hunter* (1972) was another memorable Clemens collaboration.

Eventually retiring in the early '90s, Johnson was awarded an MBE in 2014 for services to music.



Laurie Johnson at the Royal Festival Hall in 1999.

ROBERTA PARKIN./REDFERNS/GETTY

TRACY TORMÉ 1959-2024

Co-creator of *Sliders* and writer of *Fire In The Sky* and episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Odyssey 5* and *Carnivàle*.

TISA FARROW 1951-2024

American actress who starred in such Italian exploitation fare as *Zombie Flesh Eaters* and *Anthropophagus*.

NEW AUTHOR

ELIZA CHAN

MEET THE WRITER OF *FATHOMFOLK*, A FANTASY ABOUT A FLOODED CITY

Tell us about your POV characters.

→ There are three: Nami, a newly arrived water dragon from an elite family, impatient for change. Mira, a half-siren raised in the slums, hoping to transform the system from within, and Cordelia, a duplicitous seawitch shapeshifter whom nobody trusts.

What folklore does it draw upon?

→ The city's populated by humans and mythological sea creatures. The majority are from East and Southeast Asia, including water dragons, kappa, jangjamari, but there are also kelpies, rusalka and a mermaid or two.

Does it have a social message?

→ This is a story about migration. It felt apt that the fathomfolk underclass literally come out of the water. It also comes from my frustration at how women are depicted in mythologies as damsels or seductresses.

How long did it take to write the book?

→ Four years from first draft to getting an agent, but before that I'd written related stories and a terrible NaNoWriMo draft. The setting moved from pseudo-British (Manchester) to East and Southeast Asian; and from one POV character to three.

Did you have to do much research?

→ I went on deep dives about marine life. I learnt about farming, from vertical farms to saltwater-resistant crops. I'm now a firm lotus fan! It's not just a pretty water lily; the roots, stems, petals and seeds are edible, the leaves used to steam food or wrap parcels.

Fathomfolk is out on 29 February, published by Orbit.

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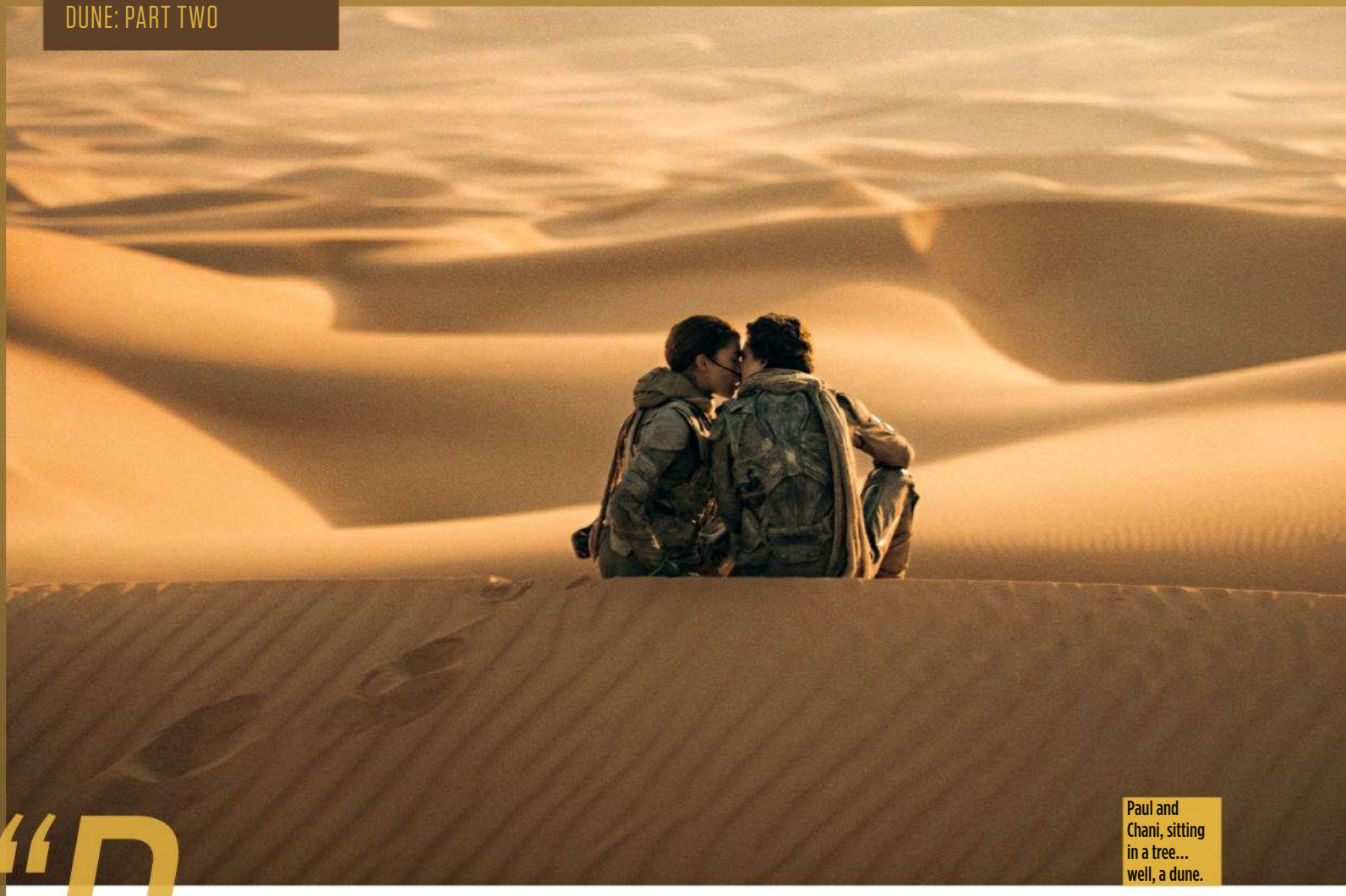
RETURN TO ARRAKIS WITH CAST AND CREATIVES FROM *DUNE: PART TWO*

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

SPICE

WORLD



Paul and Chani, sitting in a tree... well, a dune.

"POWER OVER SPICE IS POWER over all...". So begins *Part Two* of Denis Villeneuve's epic *Dune* saga, narrated by Florence Pugh as Princess Irulan.

The director says he's tried to "bring the words in a more cinematic way" and that "The movie is slightly different, the movie could be seen as more tragic than the book", aiming with this iteration to bring it closer to the intention of Frank Herbert.

Filmmaker and friend Christopher Nolan has likened *Part Two* to *The Empire Strikes Back*. It seems, then, that the original movie wasn't a hard act to follow – except, of course, for those bringing it to life.

Paul Lambert, visual effects supervisor on both movies, says to expect "a heck of a lot more action." He's not wrong – the scope and scale of *Part Two* seems incredibly ambitious. One scene in particular, which Lambert reflects on as being the very first discussed once the film was confirmed, sees Paul Atreides learning to ride a sandworm.

"Denis came up with this absolutely amazing idea when he was pitching us," Lambert recalls. "Basically, whenever a Fremen wants to ride a worm they put a thumper on top of a dune, the worm comes, takes the thumper, the dune starts collapsing, and as the dune is collapsing the Fremen then get onto the worm. He pitched this, I thought, 'This is such an amazing visual – how the heck are we going to do this?'"

Spoiler: they did it, and it's breathtaking. Lambert reveals it's a mixture of real elements that are enhanced and CG shots. "We always try to shoot everything, even though we end up having to augment or replace a vast part of the frame."

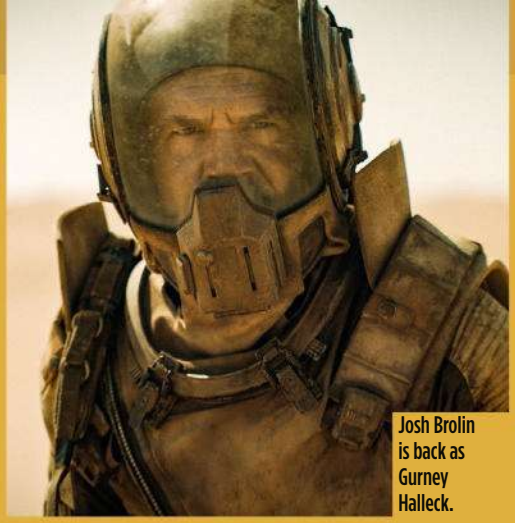
That includes having to manipulate the height of the sand dune – theirs was around 12ft – and blasting sand onto Timothée Chalamet. "He would start a certain colour at the start of the scene, and then end up completely orange by the end... But we had that real element of him running and kicking up sand behind his feet. We keep all that and then just subtly extend everything else so that it's in the correct position for when he's riding on the worm."

Riding the creature itself takes place on a huge gimbal with a partial worm in the centre. "The way in which we do the visual effects is that light and performance are some things which I don't want to mess with. Because if I do, you can guarantee it's not gonna look as believable as if I don't mess with it.

"So that's always the push on set, and Denis is fully on board with this, and Patrice [Vermette] the production designer, and Greig Fraser the DOP. They understand that, yes, I can create magical things in the background, but I don't do magic, right? So I need something tangible and real which I can then work from."

Despite having a shorter schedule than *Part One*, *Part Two* has "way more action" and "the work was huge, incredibly complex."

"You'd think that you would use a lot of the assets from the first one, but no, everything did change, but the amount of time didn't get any longer – the usual!" Lambert laughs. "There are variations on the ornithopters, we have different spice crawlers, we have a spice harvester, we have the Emperor's ship. It's all change. In the same aesthetic, but everything's different."



Josh Brolin is back as Gurney Halleck.

Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler) claims another kill.

Rebecca Ferguson also returns, as Jessica.

“There are variations on the ornithopters, we have different spice crawlers”

Aside from the sandworm sequences, Lambert recalls another ambitious moment in *Part Two*. “It’s the attack on the Harkonnen spice harvester. We get to see harvesters in *Dune* One, but we have a full-on scene of the Fremen attacking and in the end blowing up one of these things.

“These harvesters have legs which move throughout the desert, so we built partial legs on tractors, which could then move so that we then extended that out.

“We have another sequence where Paul meets Gurney and that’s a different harvester which, again, gets blown up because there’s another attack. This, again, was shot in the desert. We have ornithopters blowing up and crashing to the ground.

“We did practical explosions for once in the desert, to be used for reference, so we spent way more time in the desert. It’s tough with the desert, jumping around in the sand and what have you. But honestly, it’s all relative – we’re shooting *Dune* Two! It’s an absolutely fabulous experience. So even if I’m tired, it’s perfect.”

He says that Vermette and Villeneuve produced a concept book, with the look of “the entire film figured out. If we *Continued on page 35...*

“Oh come on, it’s only a worm... oh gaaaaawd!”

PRINCESS IRULAN
FLORENCE PUGH

Tell us about Princess Irulan.

Who the hell is Princess Irulan! She is the daughter of the Emperor, who is played by the fantastic Christopher Walken. It’s funny, I was asked this morning, is she like any of the other feisty characters that I’ve played before? Whilst she may be internally, I think she’s probably one of the quietest characters I’ve ever played.

She is someone that is constantly listening, and always learning, and that was something that I was so excited [about] when I was reading the script. I always acknowledged that she was always aware, maybe when other people weren’t aware, that she was recording probably internally what was going on. She’s calculated.

I think that excited me the most, to see someone that was planning. You don’t necessarily know what they’re planning for, but they are aware and they are planning. That’s a very exciting character to get to work with, because you’re trying to figure out where her loyalties lie, where her wisdom ends and what her abilities are. And it may not be loud, and it may not be feisty, and it may not be gobby like my usual characters always are.

But she’s definitely intelligent. That’s been a really nice fine line to play. We’ll find out more about Princess Irulan, I’m learning about her as well.

You had location scenes at the Brion Tomb in Italy, which is the first time a movie has ever filmed there.

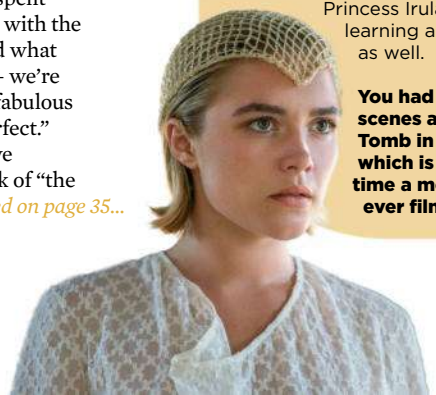
I didn’t break anything, thank god! It’s a huge privilege to work with crew members that are unbelievably dedicated to their craft, and I think especially on *Dune*, the attention to detail with locations and sets, it’s just mind-blowing – it really transports you every time you come to set. And that was my first day of shooting!

We shot in that memorial space. It really is a very haunting space. There’s so many different pockets of the building, and pockets of the area, that completely transports you. Obviously it is exactly like the world of *Dune*. That was our first two days there and I was already kind of amazed that I was filming *Dune*, but I was also there with Charlotte Rampling...

It’s one of those incredible “pinch me” moments when you walk onto a movie as large and as epic as this, and you’re in a space that has huge respect and huge power. It only kind of gets you into the gear that you need to be put in for a movie like this.

What was the most ambitious or challenging moment of filming?

When you’re on a movie that matters so much to so many people, there really aren’t that many challenges. I’d say for everyone across the board, one of the biggest challenges when you’re doing something that you care so much about, and you’re wearing the clothes that we’re wearing, is always weather conditions. When you’re making something this epic, your complaint of being hot is so minuscule! Those are the little things but other than that, it’s a dream being on a job like this.



PAUL ATREIDES
TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET

Do you believe in fate or destiny?
Yes and no. I believe in finding your purpose and finding what your mission is in life, but also who you are to become – who you are to become to your family, to your friends, to yourself. But then obviously, the second we're born there's a lot at play beyond our own power that puts us where we are.

What was the most ambitious moment in *Part Two* for you?
It was riding the sandworm, because it was such a technological feat, but it was achieved practically. They had a worm unit, a separate film unit from the main unit, that took four months to shoot a two-minute sequence, with a shot list that was extraordinarily complex and would make any film student buckle at the knees! I also think it represents something emotional in the story. It's not just something to look at, it's a big coming of age for Paul.

What was it like to ride the worm for the first time?
I was flabbergasted. I was impressed by the set, how they came up with it. As opposed to trying to convey an entire sandworm, they very hyper-realistically built a very small portion of the sandworm, which I thought was sort of ingenious. I love that there were real stakes to the moment – it wasn't doing a cool thing in a cool movie. It was probably the most important piece of Paul coming of age, this test, where if he falls on his face, if he dies, then the prophecy would have not been meant for him.

Denis Villeneuve says the most exciting thing about *Part Two* is the change in Paul. Is he a different character to the Muad'Dib?
It's definitely the same person. All of us should be so lucky, not like Paul who lives a hard life, but in our own lives to evolve and live many chapters but as the same person. So this is very much Paul Atreides, but not the boyish figure we saw at the beginning of the first one. This is a young man stepping into his role amongst the Fremen people and then beyond that – stepping into a leadership role that he's not necessarily keen on but called to and steps into.

Frank Herbert was worried that the character was misunderstood...
This is a warning against religious fanaticism, and worship of leaders or charisma, like we see all too commonly in the world today. Because it's tempting, and it's an easy way out. This is very much a cautionary tale. Which isn't obvious because perhaps when you think sci-fi or you think popular story, we think of the obvious figures of hero and villain; you wouldn't necessarily think there's a central figure that's something of a hero, but what's called of him is villainous.

I think this movie walks that line very, very carefully and closely, and if we're lucky to do *Messiah*, a third one, I think we'll explore it even more successfully. I think this movie would have to have a certain amount of success for that to happen. But we'd be very motivated to do one, to do *Messiah*.

What went into the fights for *Part Two*?
A lot of training with our fight coordinator, Roger Yuan, who gives a brilliant performance in this movie too – he's Lanville, the character that battles with Feyd-Rautha in the gladiator sequence. That actor was actually our fight coordinator and the gentleman I trained with on the first one, and on this movie.

So a lot of preparation, a lot of rehearsal with Austin [Butler]. And some incorporation of guerrilla elements in Paul's fighting now, even the placement of his crysknife on his back, which wouldn't be traditional for an Atreides fighting style. Little details like that are definitely in there.

There's also a love story playing out in *Part Two*, isn't there?
It so grounded the movie for me, the performance and the story. It was such a privilege to work with Denis because at the centre of this enormous world-building and action-packed world that's 8,000 years in the future is this very relatable relationship between these two young people. That just grounded the movie and the tone, and put it in a real place.

Timothée Chalamet, with Zendaya as Chani.

Director Denis Villeneuve (left) walks the set.

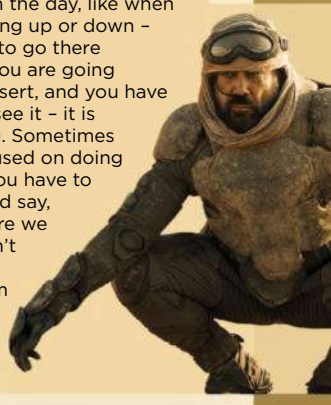
STILGAR
JAVIER BARDEM

How would you describe Stilgar's relationship with Paul?
I think it's a relationship of starting to not trust this newcomer that acts like he knows that he's bringing something special. Then the arc happens to go through different layers. That includes being almost like a father figure to him, and also a mentor, to end up in a person, Stilgar, who blindly worships him. So it's a little bit of an exposition of religious fanaticism, that happens to Stilgar because of his strong belief that he must be the one. He *has* to be the one.

There's a cultural melting pot in the novel with the Fremen.
It is about that. It's also about trying to find in ourselves what we need in order to help our people to become one, in the sense that there are two clashes. There's a big clash in this second part about the young generation of Fremen and the old generation of Fremen that I represent.

Zendaya represents the young one, about them not wanting to believe, because they don't believe in such a thing. They believe in themselves. While my generation is about something else, something bigger beyond our control that has to lead us the way. The way it's portrayed in the stories is beautiful, because he doesn't give any answer, but it puts you in a place where you have to wonder what is more productive.

What was it like being back in the desert?
We would be amazed about the locations – every day there would be something new to discover in Jordan and Abu Dhabi. Those landscapes are absolutely breathtaking. When you are at certain hours in the day, like when the sun is coming up or down – when we have to go there shooting and you are going through the desert, and you have the chance to see it – it is pretty amazing. Sometimes you are so focused on doing your job, but you have to look around and say, "Hey, look where we are." They didn't repeat any location from the first film.



CHANI
ZENDAYA

Denis Villeneuve has described this as a war movie and a romance...

What Denis is masterful at is, in these kinds of films where everything is so big, the stakes are so high, and everything quite literally feels otherworldly, he has a keen sense of finding what's human, and what connects. What's the connective tissue that's emotional, that no matter quite literally what planet you're from, you can feel? That, at the end of the day in this situation, was love.

And trying to sculpt out and find a love story amidst all that in *Dune* is not easy. Especially when you add something that I'm very grateful for. I appreciate that in this version he gave Chani a real perspective, a real point of view, and allowed her to stand firm in that, which adds more for me to be able to enjoy and sink my teeth into. Because she's not meeting the messiah and going, "Oh, he's the messiah, great, love you!". There's more of a battle and resistance to everything he is and represents.

At the end of the day it's a battle between the mind and the heart. That's a lot of fun, as an actress, to kind of figure out. So he has to earn his way into her heart – it's not just handed over, given.

That was really fun to carve out with everyone, because it really was a group thing. Denis would have new scenes, he'd come and he'd say, "I just wanted to add a little extra scene." In every scene that we have, we always do, like, a glances pass, which is just us, me and Timothée, on opposite sides of the room glancing at each other. He said, "You did it in every scene," so that at some point, if he ever needed to add some extra glances to build that story, you'd be surprised what you can do with a literal glance. I just appreciated finding that.

What was the most ambitious moment of filming this movie?

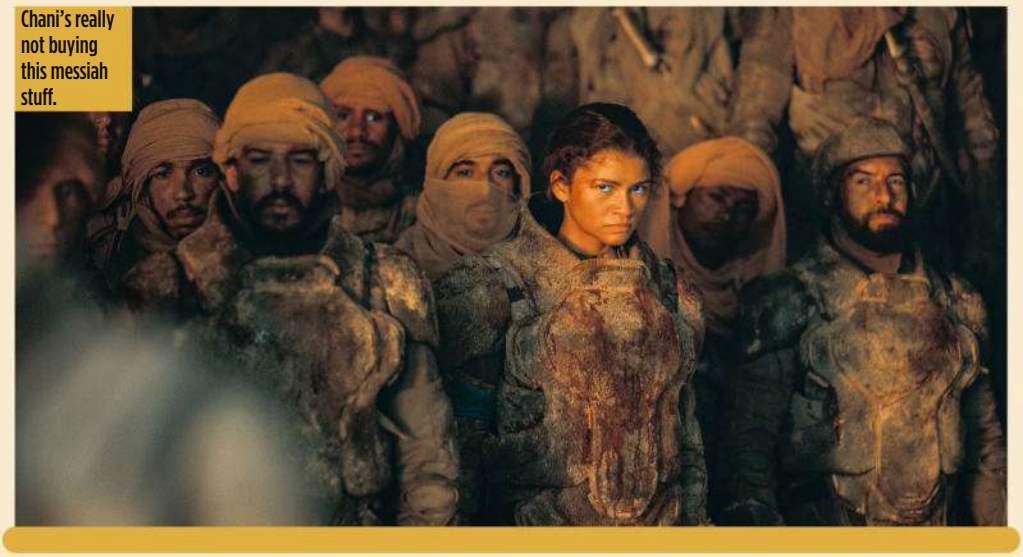
I feel like it's an ambitious movie in general. I am constantly wondering how Denis fits it all in his brain and still is nice and kind and patient, because there's just so much going on all the time. Somehow you still feel like you have his attention too.

I think every day when you go to work, and you're either in these massive, beautifully built sets, or you're on location, and you get to see the most gorgeous views and nature that I've ever seen and that's your day job... I get to see the sunrise and the sunset in these places and that's where I get to go to work. So it's hard to complain and be like, "Man, this is challenging," because at the end of the day, you really feel like you're a part of something much bigger than yourself.

Even the days where you feel tired, you look at Denis and you see how excited he is, and how happy just to be there, and you're completely reinvigorated. I feel like the whole thing is ambitious, it's a lot to bite off. If anyone can pull it off and do it, it would be Denis.

Have you read *Dune Messiah* yet?

I have... I started it. I started it a long time before we started the second film. Then I thought to myself, I'm getting a little ahead of myself, I need to go back and reread the first one. So I then instead just went back to reading *Dune* again. But I am excited to dive into it when the time comes to get into that.



Chani's really not buying this messiah stuff.

BARON HARKONNEN
STELLAN SKARSGÅRD

The Baron has a new throne – is there new make-up too?

I didn't have to spend that long in make-up on the first film. I was naked sometimes! It took eight hours in the make-up chair, and I was not naked in this one. But I didn't change physically, we didn't do any make-up changes of the poison. It's not like in [David] Lynch's film, he's distorted and there's pus running over his face and stuff; he can't survive without that new machine with those balls and pumps and stuff. That's the only difference we did, because we didn't want to put too much make-up on – which is funny to say when we'd just put eight hours of make-up on him.

There's darkness in the Harkonnens. How do you get to that?

The thing is, they don't think that they are doing evil. Maybe. I don't think they're pretty dark at all. They're Machiavellian. It's a tough world they live in. They think that the only way to survive in this world is by treating people like assholes and killing people and all that stuff. They're not more cruel than Henry the Eighth was. So it's very Renaissance in that way.

What's it like being part of this majestic vision?

It's a dream come true that it's also a blockbuster and an art film at the same time. Of course, I wish that Lars von Trier's films were blockbusters too, but they're not. We've got to face that. They have a limited appeal to people. But I'm very happy about it. I have to go back to doing European films to be able to do some arthouse movies.

FEYD-RAUTHA AUSTIN BUTLER

What did you think of Feyd's overall look?

I had long conversations with Denis before we went down the road and, of course, I'd seen the first film and so seen what Stellan had done. I knew that that was the world that I would be fitting into. The first film was just brilliant, and the whole Harkonnen world that Stellan led, I thought was just magnificent. So the first time that I was able to see the transformation, it just helped me to leave this world behind and enter into the Harkonnen world in a way that was very inspiring and exciting.

How do you find the humanity or darkness in Feyd?

Whenever I think of any quote-unquote villainous character in real life, I don't think that they see themselves as the villain. So for that, it was spending a lot of time imagining the brutality of the life that I would have grown up into as Feyd and the role models I would have had – the Baron being one of them – and the vicious nature that you have in order to survive and in order to thrive. So for me, it was just trying to understand what it would be like growing up in that environment.

As Feyd, I think it's looking at who has the most power, and that is the Baron in a way – that's the person that I'm spending the most time around. But also looking back at what childhood would have been between Feyd and his mother, and the lack of love and the feeling of needing to survive by that brutality. So a lot of that was the inspiration for me.

There are big fight scenes – what was the training like?

I started six months before heading to Budapest, prepping in kali and escrima, which are Filipino stick fighting. That was because I knew I was going to be using two knives, and so in order to have the dexterity and the ability to use two weapons in that way, I worked a lot with Roger Yuan and his entire incredible stunt team. Then from there we started to adapt more of the brutality of the way that the Harkonnens might fight.

So there were times where the image was almost a train coming, where it was not going to be stopped, as opposed to elegance. Then finding the dynamics of that, where there might be subtle movements but then big brutal vicious movements as well. So it's kind of just finding his particular style, and a lot of that was just rehearsing fights over and over and saying, "What if we try something different, what if we try something there?"

Then also Denis and I talked very early on and he said, "I want you to be physically imposing", so I started gaining as much weight as I could. That also helped, to just feel heavier going into those fights.

Who was he for you when you read the script?

He grew up with the role model of the Baron being the man with the power, and Feyd is hungry for power, and feels as though he can make a real difference and bring power to the entire race of the Harkonnens. So I think ultimately the main driving forces are power and strength. With that, I don't think psychopaths see themselves as psychopaths. I think instead, it's more images for me where if a mosquito lands on your arm and you happen to kill it, you're not thinking about it. So a lot of it was seeing people in that way, it just has a different hierarchy of morals, that they mean as much to me as that mosquito.

Feyd menaces Lady Margot (Lea Seydoux).

Filming in the desert was, unsurprisingly, rather hot.

Denis Villeneuve with DOP Greig Fraser.

> **“We did practical explosions in the desert, to be used for reference”**

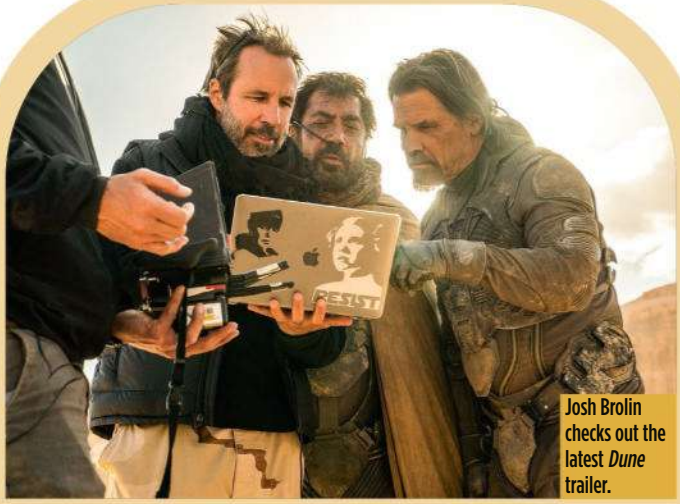
have an image it’s because he’s envisaged what this is going to be, and I can pretty much guarantee that that’s what’s going to be in post,” he explains. “If you take away that book of the imagery, and we do a shot and we don’t know what the background is going to be, then it can be open to, ‘Okay, well, if we do this in the background, but it doesn’t match the light on the foreground, there isn’t much I can do.’

“I can grade it, push it around, to try and make it fit, but your eye will always pick up something – you don’t know why it’s wrong, but you know it’s wrong.

“That’s very much a guiding principle in the way in which myself and Denis work, that I and he totally understand. If I go to him and say that this is gonna be problematic, he’ll change the shot. There isn’t a world of him having a dodgy visual effect shot in the movie which then takes you out. You move into the story, and then suddenly, something comes out where you’re like, ‘What the fuck is that?’

“Which is a fantastic way to work, because it’s very collaborative.”

Dune: Part Two is in cinemas from 1 March.



Josh Brolin checks out the latest *Dune* trailer.

GURNEY HALLECK
JOSH BROLIN

We saw the baliset in *Part One*, but never got to hear you sing...

I sang last time, it’s just Denis decided to cut it out! I sang and rightfully he cut it out because it was wrong. He felt so bad. He felt much worse than he needed to, because I’m not that insecure. I’m a *little* insecure, but I’m not that insecure.

This time around, he basically said, “Brolin, write the lyrics, and Hans, do the music, and work together,” which was very strange. I don’t know how you get put in the same collaborative place as Hans Zimmer. That sounds like a really bad idea. But we fought our way through it... We didn’t actually fight, he travelled his way through it and I was in the desert eating sand through it. I think the music in what was chosen is a lot better than anything I could have done. The lyrics, though short, are appropriate.

How would you describe his relationship with Paul?

I think it’s very paternal. In the trajectory of – especially this part of the story – him really turning into quote-unquote the One... I think, as a parent, you’re either going to have your child surpass you, which is what every parent hopes to do, to raise a child that does better than they do. Then there’s those parents out there that actually get jealous from it. Gurney is such a practical kind of... it’s not a good word to use, but a spiritualist kind of character.

What you get out of it is when you see the rising stratospheric trajectory of Paul, and then you see the pride that Gurney has around it – as long as he can be there to fight with him, selfishly, I think all is good in the world. So I think it’s a very healthy, paternal relationship, even though it’s based on violence, but it’s not ultimately. .

What was the most ambitious moment for you in *Part Two*?

A sword fight that I have to do at 55 years old. That was definitely ambitious. I wouldn’t have wished that stress on any other 55-year-old in the world! I would like to think I’m 25, but I’m not, so pain feels different than it did at 25.

I’m happy to know that we pulled it off. I’m happy to know that we basically did it. Not that it comes across as this, but there was a fight in there that we did as a one-er and I was very happy with the results. I’ve been in that situation before with *Oldboy*. I was in a situation that was a four-and-a-half minute fight. When I first started, within 30 seconds I was prostrate and gasping for breath and saying, “There’s no way that I can do this,” which was similar on this. We got to a place where I was able to do it multiple times, and I think we did a good job in the end.

HELL'S FROZEN OVER

AS THE GHOSTBUSTERS HEAD BACK TO NEW YORK FOR ANOTHER CHILLING ADVENTURE, *SFX* MEETS THE DIRECTOR BEHIND *AFTERLIFE* FOLLOW-UP FROZEN EMPIRE

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

VENKMAN

WHEN *GHOSTBUSTERS: Afterlife* reached cinemas, the franchise was a proton blast away from being trapped and tossed into the basement for another 30 years. Paul Feig's female-fronted reboot in 2016 had disappointed at the box office, and no one knew whether that misfire would haunt *Afterlife* as it tried to win back audiences by bringing back the original 'Busters.

"With *Afterlife*, [director] Jason [Reitman] and I felt, both in conceiving and writing it, and then watching that film come to life, that it was like finding a rusty old proton pack wrapped in a cloth in the garage and having to dust it off, turn it on, and see if it still fires," co-writer Gil Kenan tells *SFX*.

"A lot of that film was about tapping into the original spark of inspiration for *Ghostbusters* and rekindling it, both in terms of new characters and audiences, so that same magic could be brought back into focus on the screen. That was the goal, and we're immensely proud of the characters that were brought to the screen."

The result was a resounding success, not only financially and critically but with the franchise's fans, who approved of the creative team's choice to focus on Egon Spengler's family as they reckoned with the founding Ghostbuster's history of spirit-hunting.

"*Afterlife* was introducing the world to the Spengler family and to the idea that Ghostbusters could be a going concern into the 21st century," Kenan continues. "But that was laying the groundwork for a world of storytelling. Now the toys are laid out on the floor, ready to be played with."

Phoebe Spengler (Mckenna Grace).

Director Gil Kenan and producer Jason Reitman.

EVOLUTION

With their sequel, Reitman and Kenan have written a follow-up that both continues the Spengler story and pushes the franchise in a new direction. "That's what *Frozen Empire* is," says Kenan, who has stepped into the director's chair for the upcoming film. "A lot of the pretext was already in place and we've been able to leap into the story, stakes, villain and mythology in a way that allows us to take the next big step forward. This is the next big step for *Ghostbusters*."

Everything has been scaled up in *Frozen Empire*. First, there's the setting: the action has been moved from the countryside of Summerville, Oklahoma, back to New York City's Manhattan, the ancestral home of the Ghostbusters. That means a return to the iconic firehouse where the original 'Busters initially established their base, and which featured briefly in *Afterlife*'s second post-credits sting.

"When writing this story, we put a lot of thought into how we are defining and driving this franchise into the future," says Kenan. "You need a story and a canvas that grows exponentially in every direction, and part of that was down to the location. But also, because this is the next step in a saga – the saga of Phoebe Spengler and her family – there is a deepening emotional story, for Phoebe specifically and the Spengler family as a whole.

"We're now firmly planted in her middle-to-late teenage years, with a whole storm of feelings and obstacles that come with that. All of that works hand in hand with the larger narrative stakes."

Frozen Empire takes place two years after *Afterlife*, with Carrie Coon's matriarchal Callie Spengler, along with her two children, Phoebe (Mckenna Grace) and Trevor (Finn Wolfhard), and Paul Rudd's Gary Grooberson, moving to New York and answering the call to become Ghostbusters. *Afterlife* breakouts Podcast (Logan Kim) and Lucky Domingo (Celeste O'Connor) are also along for the ride.

"No family has a rulebook for how to exist as a family unit and a ghost-busting operation; you have to rewrite the rulebook every day, and that's the reality of the Spenglers as we meet them," Kenan explains. "We pick up the story in real time. They're already a ghost-busting

STOCK ART: GETTY

Paul Rudd, Carrie Coon, Mckenna Grace and Finn Wolfhard on set.

> We're confronted by a menace to our characters, to the city and the wider world

family. But they are very, very real, and the story presents very serious obstacles to them. We very much deal with the tension of their life/work balance. That feels really grounded and totally relatable, even to families who don't happen to be Ghostbusters."

The Spenglers, though, are not alone. The remaining original Ghostbusters – Bill Murray's Dr Peter Venkman, Dan Aykroyd's Dr Ray Stantz and Ernie Hudson's Dr Winston Zeddemore (Harold Ramis, who played Egon Spengler, passed away in 2014) – are all back, and they still ain't afraid of no ghosts. "We established them as ghost-busting emeritus characters in *Afterlife*," says Kenan. "Their emergence showed that they still know how to strap the packs on. When the going gets tough, they know where to point the business end of a neutrino wand."

A new villain known as the Death Chill, a mysterious spectre that freezes over New York and harnesses the power to kill through fear itself, brings the trio into the heart of the new film's narrative. "We're confronted by a menace – to our characters, to the city and to the wider world – which requires more than any of the individual groups of Ghostbusters can handle," Kenan says. "The scale of the challenge is so great that it's going to require every ghost-busting pair of hands that can be mustered."

The original 'Busters are not simply mentors or "spiritual godfathers" in *Frozen Empire*, but active participants in fighting the new evil that threatens New York City. "There comes a point in every story where the task of survival, of defeating the thing that you're up against, is going to require you to act," Kenan adds. "That's the moment that's really thrilling for me as a *Ghostbusters* fan: watching their involvement in the story redefine itself, grow and become more fully fleshed out in a way that speaks to the promise of the original *Ghostbusters* and *Ghostbusters II*, and what was glimpsed in the fields outside of Summerville in *Afterlife*. There's a direct line from there into who they are now and how they act here in our new story."

The director emphasises that they were careful not to "squander" the opportunity that bringing back these characters brought; the →

NEW FOE, NEW FRIENDS

Frozen Empire also introduces new characters, one of them played by Kumail Nanjiani

"Kumail is brilliant in the film, I'm very proud of his character, his performance," says director Gil Kenan. "He comes into the story as somebody who has a direct connection to one of the elements that becomes extraordinarily meaningful to the story. For him, it's about stepping up to the plate in a way that will allow him to become closer to his full potential.

"He's really funny. He's also, in a lot of ways, representative of how we approach the story as non-Ghostbusters and as fans of the *Ghostbusters* world, both with a sense of scepticism and wonder, that healthy balance. So by the end of this story his character becomes a natural and inevitable addition to the universe of characters."

The firehouse freezes over. Yikes!

Some familiar foes are back...

...but there's also a brand new one.

The original gang is (mostly) all here!

writers made sure the 'Busters were "actual characters" in the story rather than being minor cameos. "We had a duty to make those legendary characters integral to this story," he says.

With the Spenglers and the original 'Busters sharing screen time, there was little space for other classic characters to appear. For instance, Sigourney Weaver's Dana Barrett – glimpsed during the first *Afterlife*'s post-credits scene – has not been confirmed to be in the film; fans have also been eager to see Rick Moranis's Louis Tully back on screen. Meanwhile, the chances of a crossover with Feig's *Ghostbusters* reboot, which takes place in an alternative cinematic universe, seem slimmer with every passing day.

"There are a lot of characters in the three preceding *Ghostbusters* stories," says Kenan. "We already have a lot of story and characters to juggle, and it was really important for us that when characters come back they're able to have real story, real arcs. So, if anybody's not featured in this film, it's only because this particular story wants to make full use of the characters that we do bring out. We've got more stories to tell in the future. Nothing is off the table."

RETRIBUTION

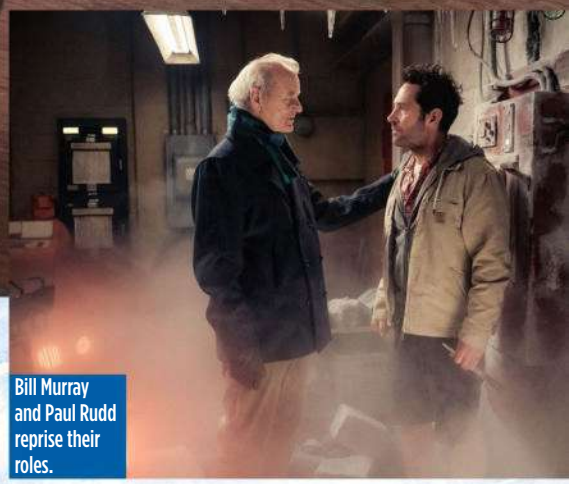
The film does, however, take time to establish the threat of the Death Chill. "We've moved past the mythology of Gozer, which defined *Ghostbusters* and was rekindled in *Afterlife* as a way to close that initial loop," the filmmaker says. "We have finally freed ourselves to now introduce a whole new menace, and with that, we've created a new mythology and we've expanded how deep and how frightening and how dangerous a villain can be in one of these stories.

"It was thrilling on the page when we were writing, and it's even more exciting now for me in the editing room, as I'm putting the finishing touches on the film. We're able to bring elements that we care about, that make us connected to the world of *Ghostbusters*, and then to blow the roof off it, and to take the audience to uncharted territories."

When creating the Death Chill, Kenan explains, they tapped into historical traditions for inspiration but were determined to create a fresh mythology around the entity – one that would make our heroes afraid of what it could do, and present them with a Herculean task that would require them to try and pull off the impossible to stop it. "It's a top-down fresh mythology," Kenan continues. "There is no linkage to any of the villain stories we've seen thus far in a *Ghostbusters* world. That was a stated aim for us as we set off on this adventure."

It is unclear whether "Death Chill" refers to a single menace or something akin to a plague (Kenan's careful not to spoil any surprises the sequel has in store), but whatever the case, New York will be a little more frosty than usual thanks to its presence. "At the beginning, we had this singular image of the team having to bust ghosts in a city that had been frozen over, our heroes racing on ice to try to overcome some threat," Kenan says. "But the core of the Death Chill, and how it was used as a jumping-off point for our villain, and the mythology that goes with the character, is much simpler and directly connected to a core conceit of ghosts and ghost detection and ghost-busting. It's that feeling of the hairs standing up on the back of

> "The secret is that the scarier a scene is, the funnier the next joke is going to play"



Bill Murray and Paul Rudd reprise their roles.

Chasing a Sewer Dragon Ghost.

Phoebe notices an old "friend"...

The Ecto-1 causes havoc in New York.

Podcast (Logan Kim, second left) is back too.

Yes, that is James Acaster, playing Lars Pinfield.

GETTING THE GANG BACK TOGETHER

Directing the original *Ghostbusters* actors in their famous roles was a dream come true for director Gil Kenan

"The sad truth is that it's such a mammoth undertaking to make a movie like this and you become completely overwhelmed in the day-to-day task of just being able to lift the story and get it to the place where you need it, and so you're so hyper-focused.

"But I did have a startling realisation one day of filming of this film, where I sat back and looked at the monitor, and on it were a lot of my formative movie heroes, standing shoulder to shoulder, and I realised that it was me that had called them to action, and it was me about to yell 'Cut'.

"It felt like an out-of-body experience, where all of a sudden, the whole universe collapsed in on itself, and I realised, 'Holy crap, I'm directing a *Ghostbusters* movie!' That felt like a dangerous, startling and thrilling realisation. You can't allow yourself to have that much perspective, because you would buckle under the weight of it, but in that one moment, I felt really excited and humbled."

your neck, that cold that you feel when confronted with the unknown or the supernatural. All of us feel it in one way or another, when you're scared. It's a natural sensation, to feel your joints become cold, and that shiver run down your spine. It's why that has become a cliché of thrills and terror. For us, it was an exciting and very grounded jumping-off point for an outsized, scaled-up terror in this film."

It sounds a little like the Death Chill could be something of a metaphor for global warming – not exactly a reach when the official synopses refer to our heroes having to work together to prevent "a deadly and unpredictable fate that unknowingly could affect Earth's history with a second Ice Age."

"There is a responsibility that we have, as storytellers, that each *Ghostbusters* film should exist both as a reflection of the time that it's made, but also with a timelessness that allows it to be relevant into the future," says Kenan.

"There no underlying ecological agenda beyond the fact that we're living in a world right now where up is down, down is up, and all of the perceived wisdom – what the weather will be in the future – is completely up-ended because of the way that we've mishandled our energy resources for the last 100 years. But that's a sideline that goes without saying. I don't think we need movies any more to tell us that we've dropped the ball."

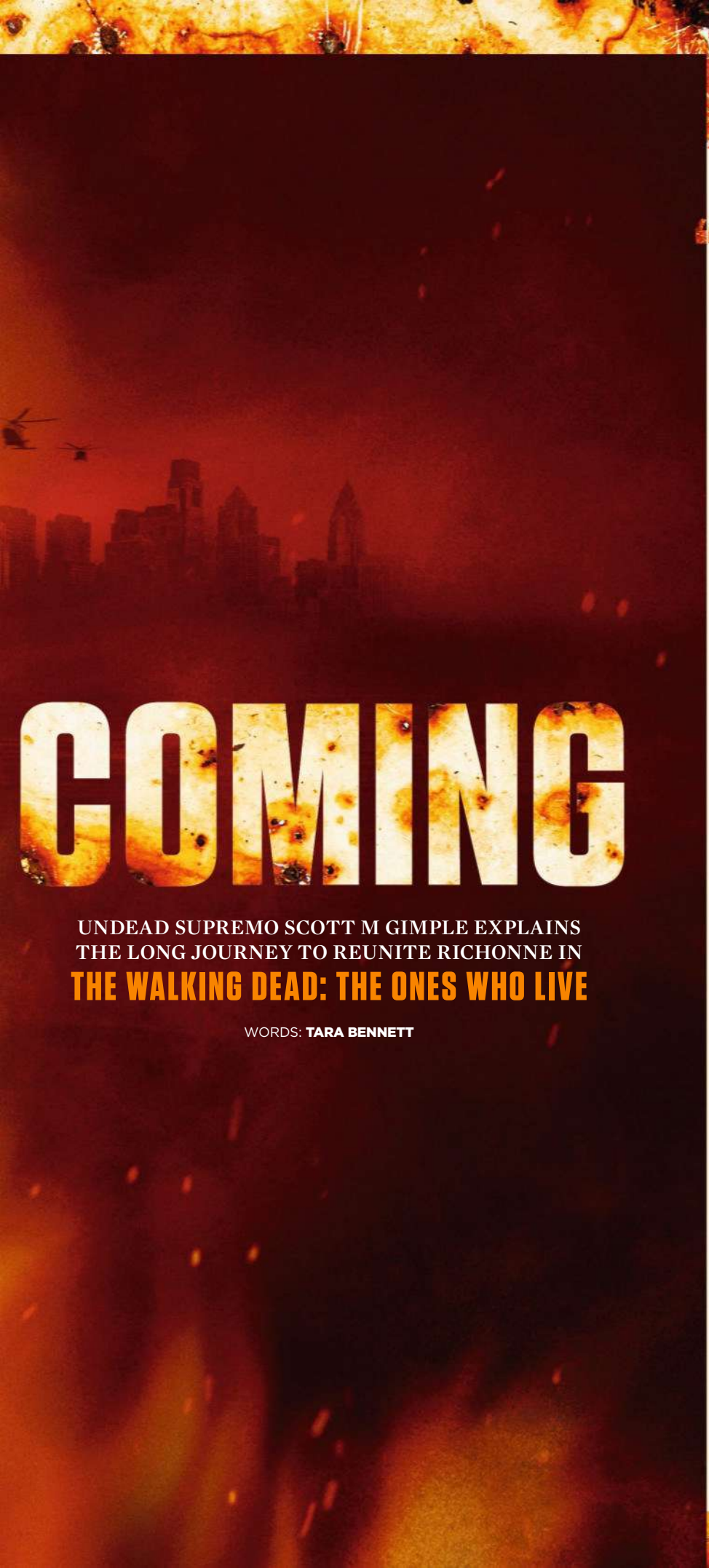
Instead of focusing on a message about the current climate crisis, Kenan wanted to make a film that would harken back to the *Ghostbusters* films of old and leave you frightened in your cinema seat. "This is a scary *Ghostbusters* movie," says Kenan, who previously helmed 2015's *Poltergeist* remake, as well as the *Scream* TV series.

"I set out to go for the thrills. As a big-screen experience, I think it's going to play like a scary, funny movie. The secret is that the scarier a scene is, the funnier the next joke is going to play. That's the way that the pendulum swings with tone. Twisting that lever to make sure that the scares land is a way of making sure that the jokes are funnier."

Despite a new villain, a fresh mythology and a few new faces, *Frozen Empire* appears to be another helping of classic *Ghostbusters* goodness – a funny, scary romp around New York City that's littered with ghosts and ghouls. Turns out this franchise may have a long afterlife after all. Now, altogether: "When there's something strange in your neighbourhood, who you gonna call?"

Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire is in cinemas from 22 March.

HOME



COMING

UNDEAD SUPREMO SCOTT M GIMPLE EXPLAINS THE LONG JOURNEY TO REUNITE RICHONNE IN

THE WALKING DEAD: THE ONES WHO LIVE

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO those *The Walking Dead* movies?" That's been the question swirling around the ether since 2018, when Andrew Lincoln exited the flagship show after eight years and 120 episodes of playing series lead Rick Grimes.

Literally as the screen went black on "What Comes After", the fifth episode of season nine, AMC sent out a press release announcing the intention to make a series of original films with Lincoln "to continue the story of Rick Grimes, with the first expected to begin production as early as 2019."

At SDCC 2019, there was a follow-up teaser trailer that just featured a Civic Republic Military (or CRM) helicopter. Then Covid arrived, which put everything on hold and effectively silenced any movie chatter.

Time also rolled on for actress Danai Gurira, who was ready for new challenges in the wake of *Black Panther*'s success and her playwriting ambitions. So, in *The Walking Dead* season 10 episode "What We Become", Michonne left Alexandria to follow up on the physical clues seemingly left by Rick for her to find that imply he's still alive.

More silence followed until SDCC 2022, when, with much fanfare, *The Walking Dead* Universe's chief content officer, Scott M Gimple, Lincoln and Gurira revealed that those movies had gone kaput. Instead, there would be a six-episode spin-off series all about Rick and Michonne. *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live* would reunite the long-separated married couple and explain where their characters have been all this time.

SHIPPING FORECAST

It was a reasonable enough shift, as precedent had already been set with other OG character mini-seasons, like *The Walking Dead: Dead City* for Maggie (Lauren Cohan) and Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), and *The Walking Dead: Daryl Dixon*, starring Norman Reedus. The Rick and Michonne series would be showrun by Gimple, with story assists by Lincoln and Gurira, and primarily focus on the thing that captivated both fans and Gimple: the two's relationship.

"We wanted to honour these characters and their journeys," Gimple tells *SFX*. "But it really just boiled down to their 'epic love story'". He adds that to really get what *The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live* is about, you have to go all the way back to when he was just a *Walking Dead* comic book obsessive hired as a writer/producer on season two.

"Even before I was showrunning *The Walking Dead*, you're planting little seeds to stories, almost in your own head, as a writer," Gimple explains about those early years on the show. "When Michonne and Rick were in the →

Michonne

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

"Rick and Michonne have always had a really strong connection, chemistry and love for each other. They are driven in the exact same way and will go to the exact same lengths that most people would not go..." Danai Gurira

Last Seen: For six long, lonely years post Rick's "death", Michonne led Alexandria and raised their children, Judith and RJ Grimes. On a mission to Bloodsworth Island to help a fellow survivor named Virgil, she quickly found herself set up. Incensed, she contained the threat. But more importantly, she discovered some of Rick's personal effects on the island, including his phone with a drawing of her and Judith. That was enough for her to head out on the road to find him.

Danai Gurira as Michonne, still on the hunt for Rick.

episode "Clear", in my mind, I was like, 'I want to do a few little things here.' Even when I read the comic, I felt in some ways those two comic characters were kindred souls. But I didn't go into the [writers'] room and say, 'Everybody! This [is happening],'" he laughs.

"I was just a writer/producer at the time, so it's almost like a little bit of fan fiction you're putting in there," he says of his inclination to craft a romantic storyline between the two characters, which did not exist in the comics. "You're also not forcing it, for a couple of reasons. It's not your decision to make. But also, there's no reason to force it yet. You can explore it in your head, and start working towards that."

It helped that *Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman was not precious about adhering to his comic book arcs. "When I was in the room with Robert, in the beginning, the fights that we would have was that I was this comic purist, and I just wanted to do the comic," Gimple recalls. "But he was like, 'Dude, I *did* the comic. Let's do some different things.'"

"Different" really went off the charts in the season six episode "The Next World", written by Angela Kang and Corey Reed, and egged-on by Gimple, which featured Rick and Michonne's first on-screen kiss. The moment forever cemented the fans' Richonne "ship" as canon. From there, the relationship bloomed across seasons despite new threats, hordes of Walkers and unintended separations. But audiences were eventually rewarded with Rick and Michonne's marriage. Theirs was a love for the ages... until it was torn asunder when Lincoln left the show, followed by Gurira.

> **"I have a showrunner credit on this, but it was very much like playing in a band"**

Four years after Lincoln departed the show, he and Gurira returned to shoot character cameos that would end up being the final scenes of series. A still-separated Rick and Michonne are searching for one another with hope; one of those Gimple story seeds intentionally added to provide a bridge to *The Ones Who Live*.

While many drafts of movie scripts were developed, most of the material was ditched because of the medium change and the amount of time that had passed. "I had all these seeds and hopes and dreams," Gimple says. "It was this massive amount of ingredients. But I think one of the biggest things that changed is it just took so long to come to be that Danai and Andy were available at the exact same time."

What Lincoln or Gurira wanted to explore now was different, so they hashed that out together. "Basically, over the course of a year, Danai, Andy and I would meet in various conference rooms across the United States, just the three of us working on this," Gimple explains. "They have a story credit from the first [episode], and Danai for the fourth episode, but we really beat out the entirety of the season together, and it was fun. We laughed a lot and we worked really hard.

"I have a showrunner credit on this, but for this one, it was very much like playing in a band," Gimple continues. "I had a lot of responsibility, but it was executing stuff that the three of us came up with together.

"We're talking from the writers' room to the set and into post. Andy and Danai spent a nice amount of time behind the Avid [video editing system] when we could do that. So yeah, this was much more like playing in a band, with all of us doing it together."

Gimple says all three of them agreed that putting Richonne front and centre in this series was a requirement. Not only because of the "epic-ness" of the pair's bond, but because they were absolutely going to need that love to get through their next set of challenges.

"One thing I was trying to explain to somebody was that love stories are not happiness, start to finish," he clarifies. "There are obstacles, and then love is achieved, and then love is denied. Love somehow either comes together or it doesn't. For me, it's like a pop song."

But there's also that aspect of Richonne that Gimple says has always been a bit unhinged. "They're both crazy," he laughs. "They both do crazy things. It is something that connects them. It is something I saw in the comics, and it is something that we very much brought to their relationship on the show.

"So when I say 'epic love story', yes, there is tenderness. But there's also that craziness that they share. That was, for all three of us, very front and centre as we told the story." →

Lesley-Ann Brandt plays new character Pearl Thorne.

What both of them end up having to do to find one another again is a big question that hovers over *The Ones Who Live*. And after years of trauma, are Rick and Michonne the same people they were six years ago, before the bridge explosion?

"If they find each other, can they *find* each other?" Gimple asks. "When we talked about them, I thought about sweeping historical dramas with war, and stories told over years where the world comes between people. It affects them and it doesn't make it easy."

SHADY LADY

Outside of the Richonne of it all, the show also afforded Gimple the opportunity to finally pay off some long-simmering storylines established in the two-season series *The Walking Dead: World Beyond*. In particular, a deeper understanding of the CRM and where Jadis's (Pollyanna McIntosh) allegiances lie within that organisation.

"Yeah, that was planned for this," Gimple confirms. "Jadis's story was a long time in the works. She's the reason Rick winds up where he does, and we envisioned her as a very big part of the story."

As for the CRM, Gimple says, "In some ways, that was initially planned to come out maybe after this. And to be, in some ways, different," he says, noting how the many delays in production shifted some ideas.

"Timing got really twisted there," he continues. "It was supposed to be another look at aspects of this. In some ways, a smaller look, to tell you the truth.

"But with all the shows, I always look for those threads to connect. You never know how things will schedule, how things come together, and the stories go. What works, and what doesn't. The CRM in this story, and everything that happens, is certainly part of that."

While loathe to spoil any particular details, Gimple is willing to say that Terry O'Quinn's Major General Beale will represent the mindset of the CRM of today.

"I've always thought about him for various roles," Gimple says regarding his appreciation for the actor. "But this is the one we eventually reached out to him about. We had a long talk about *The Walking Dead*, its world and history, and the world and history of his potential corner of *The Walking Dead*."

The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live went into production a year ago, shifting from the long-time series production home base of Georgia to New Jersey. Long-serving producers made the journey north, but otherwise it was mostly a new crew, new directors and new terrain for Gimple, Lincoln and Gurira to get used to.

"It was a very difficult production in some ways," Gimple assesses. "It's through the winter, in a new place. We'd been working in the same place with the same crew that we love so much. In some ways, we expected we were maybe even going to do that. But it turned out to be in New Jersey, with a lovely crew and great people. But it also was New Jersey weather in January and February. We were like, 'Oh, this *isn't* Georgia!'" he laughs. "So I leaned on them and they leaned on me in a lot of ways."

Recalling a favourite moment, Gimple says, "Andy lived down the hall from me in our little executive apartments. He turned into my Kramer, knocking on the door," referencing *Seinfeld*'s next-door neighbour. "I did not picture that. I did not picture being in my bathrobe, with Andy and my coffee."

Having come through the other side now, Gimple says that *The Ones Who Live* provided him some singular experiences after so many years charting this universe, like observing Gurira write and essentially showrun episode four. Or getting to argue out the best ideas with the pair of actors, in a way that they've never done before.

"We have been through an incredible, crazy, singular production, and just, like, cultural experience with each other," he reflects. "We're very close. We're like family in all ways, by the way, for better and worse."

While he won't confirm or deny if there might be more seasons of *The Ones Who Live*, Gimple says there's still plenty to explore in *The Walking Dead* Universe, even after 13 years of playing in this sandbox.

"I'm still doing what I was doing back as a writer/producer being like, 'Oh, maybe *this* could go with *that*?'" he says. "I'm telling stories in my head. I'm enjoying them, and maybe I'll get to do them."

The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live is on AMC from 25 February. UK details are TBC.

Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln): been through a lot.

Pollyanna McIntosh as Jadis: secrets to hide.

Jadis

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

"The fans have been waiting a really long time to find out what's going on with the CRM..."
Pollyanna McIntosh

Last Seen: Jadis has remained an enigmatic figure in the universe across three series. In season nine of *Walking Dead*, she joined the Alexandria community and hid from the leadership the fact that she was now a human trafficker on behalf of the Civic Republic Military, or CRM. At season's end, she found a wounded Rick and called in a CRM helicopter to take them back to the CRM's compound so that he could be treated by doctors. In *The Walking Dead: World Beyond* season two, Jadis returned as a Warrant Officer for the CRM. In time, she became a true believer in the CRM's mission. She's so dedicated that she even had her superior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Elizabeth Kublek, charged with treason and sent to prison.

Rick Grimes

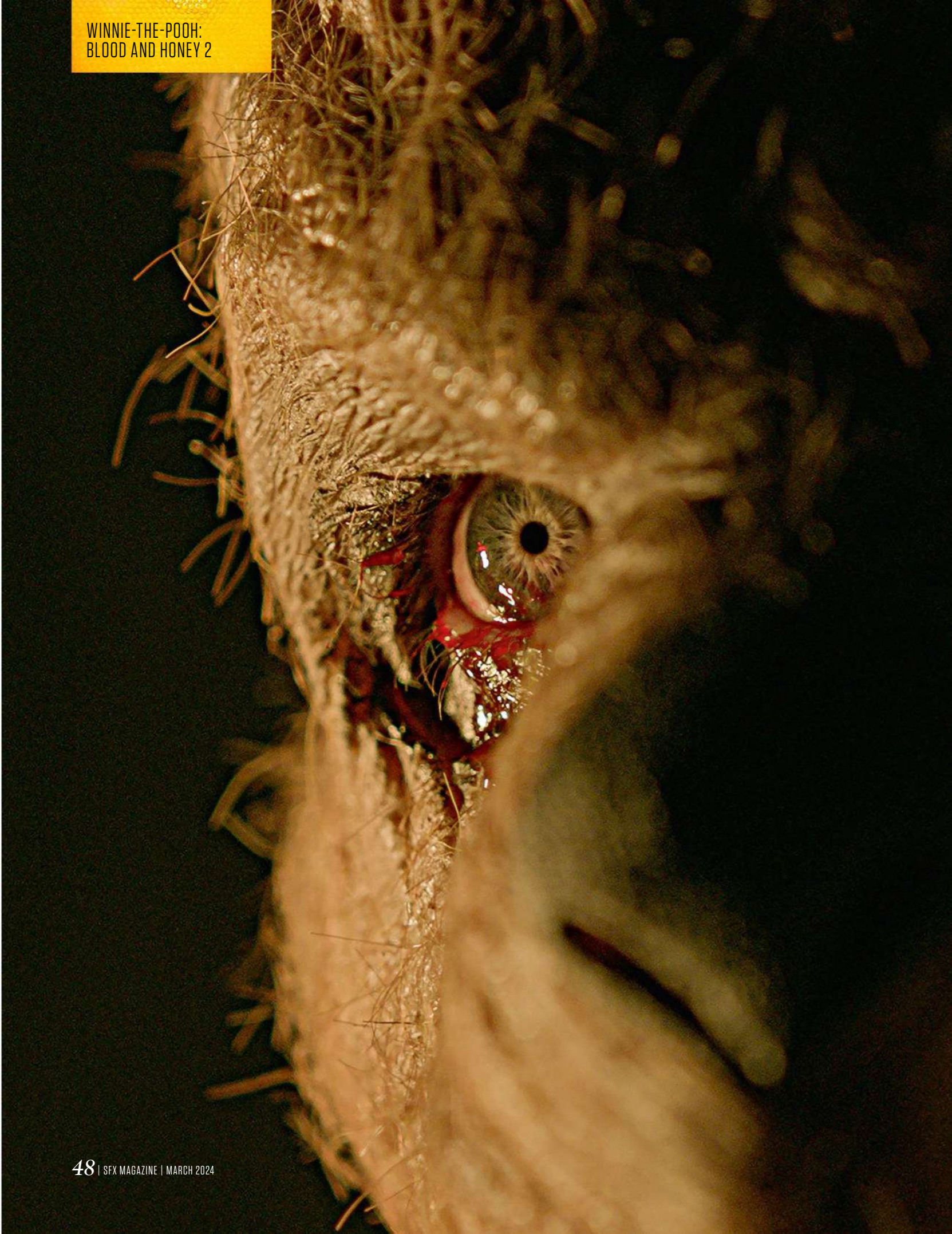
ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

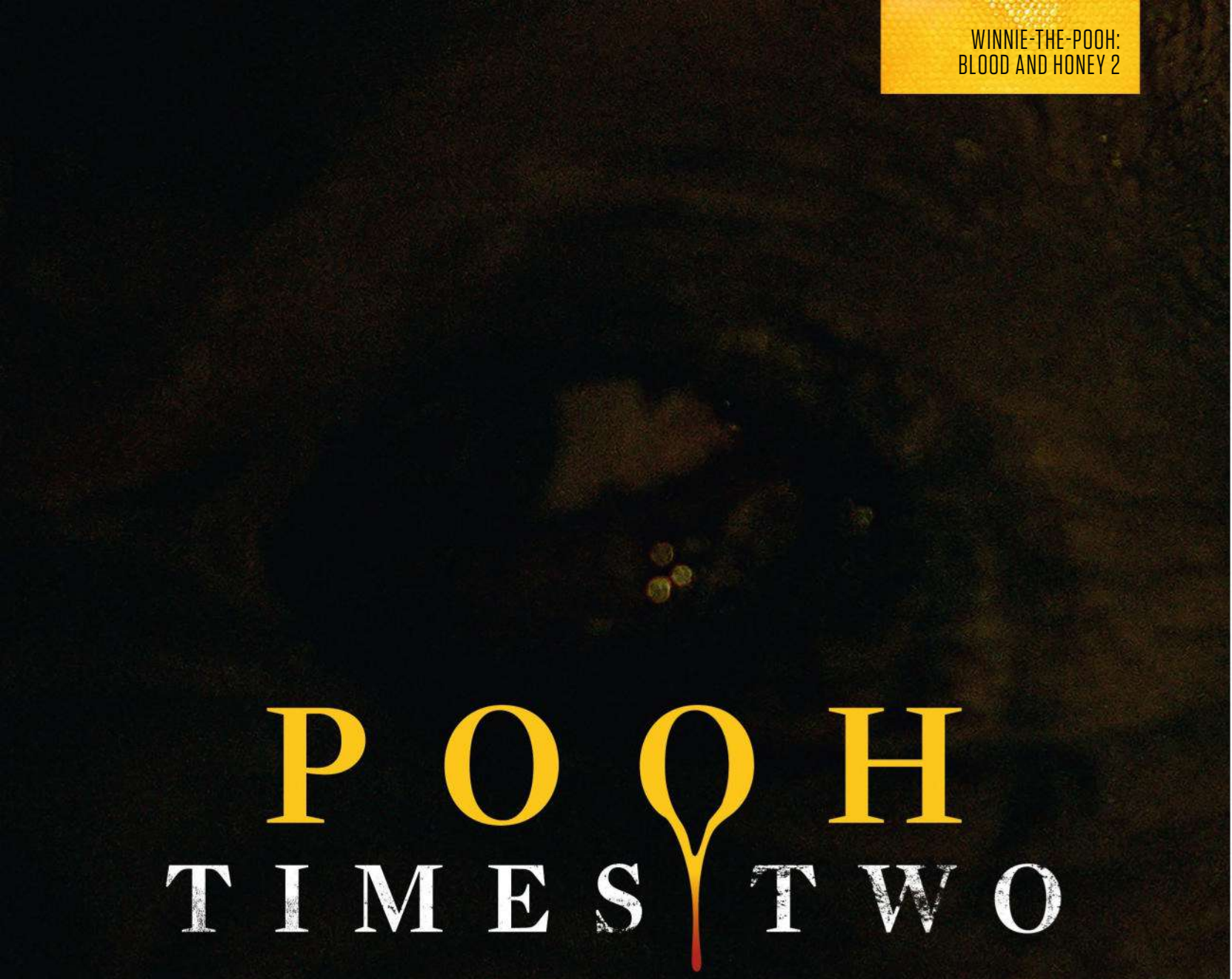
"It's an epic love story with a lot of gore..."
Andrew Lincoln

Last Seen: At the end of season nine, an injured Rick lured an enormous Walker herd away from the communities and ignited dynamite to take them all down. He got caught in the explosion and is assumed dead by his family. In actuality, he was found injured by Anne/Jadis and then taken to the CRM via helicopter to be treated. Years later, he's seen on Bloodsworth Island as a captive of the CRM. He intentionally left behind his boots and a sketch message for Michonne in the hopes that she would find them and know that he's alive.

Matthew Jeffers as Nat, another new character.

Terry O'Quinn debuts as Major General Beale.





POOH TIMES TWO

HONEY? TRAP. BEAR? BACK. DON'T GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY – WINNIE-THE-POOH RETURNS...

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

WHEN WORD HIT THE internet that the latest inductee to the public domain, AA Milne's beloved Winnie-the-Pooh, was to be reinvented as a Michael Myers-esque slasher villain in a *horror* film, everybody had an opinion.

For some, the very thought of *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey* was enough to trigger the instantaneous destruction of their childhoods. Others were hungry to see the cuddly bear slicing and dicing unsuspecting visitors to the Hundred Acre Wood.

In either case, the grisly new Winnie-the-Pooh became a viral sensation. Nobody was more surprised than writer, editor, director and producer Rhys Frake-Waterfield, who tells *SFX* the film was "made for the VOD market, not a worldwide theatrical release. We obviously didn't expect it to blow up in the way that it did!"

Financially, *Winnie* was a huge success, with screenings at thousands of cinemas – 1,200 in the United States alone – leading to box office takings of over $5 million. Critically, however, the film came in for a jolly good pooh-poohing. It currently scores 3% on Rotten Tomatoes.

"It's a really strange one for me," Frake-Waterfield considers, when asked how he coped with the critical lambasting. "To be honest, you've got to have a really, really thick skin to be a filmmaker because you get heavily, heavily criticised regardless of the means and the resources you have. When your film is out there like that, it literally gets directly compared to Marvel films, even though you're on 0.01% of their budget. We probably didn't have their *catering* budget! They're substantially different. But because of the scale *Winnie* went to, a lot of the critics did almost like-for-like comparisons."

The backlash from fans of the Winnie-the-Pooh character kicked off before the film had even been released. "As soon as it started getting reviews, people were rating it the lowest they could – and it wasn't even out in their territory. It was only out in Mexico, in a dubbed version, at the time. →

"Mum, there's a nasty Pooh outside."
"Stop that!"

The episode of *Jackanory* that was never shown.

PUBLIC DOMAIN FOR THE GAIN

You've explored the Marvel Cinematic Universe. You've travelled the Whoniverse. Now get ready to do the Poohniverse! (Name TBC.)

Rhys Frake-Waterfield and Scott Jeffreys's Jagged Edge Productions will be unleashing further horror films inspired by classic children's stories – and true to the best of shared universes, they'll be interlinked.

Already announced are *Bambi: The Reckoning* – written and directed by Dan Allen, co-editor of *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2* – and *Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare*, written by Frake-Waterfield with Chambers directing.

"We need to see what the appetite is, but we could do some absolutely crazy stuff, like a crossover between Bambi and Winnie-the-Pooh," Frake-Waterfield says. "That could go incredibly mad. I need to sit down and think how mad we want to go with it! We could have Winnie riding Bambi!"

"So we had this wave of people trying to bring the film down by rating it 0% – when it was literally impossible for them to have seen it. I don't know why it's got this magnetic attraction that makes a certain proportion of people just dislike it and try to attack it. I've kind of brushed all that aside. You've just got to keep going.

"On the other hand, that element is what's made it blow up to the kind of scale it has. It's like lightning in a bottle. It's attracting people, making the film go crazy."

The film now has a dedicated fanbase, with Frake-Waterfield pointing to its Rotten Tomatoes audience score of 50% as a demonstration of "disconnect" between critics and filmgoers.

"Horror generally is... not looked down upon, but it doesn't really score well with critics a lot of the time.

"There are a lot of *really* great horror films out there, some of the best-known in the genre, and yet they score so badly as films. You've got this niche audience which really likes *Winnie* and I think that is kind of what helps give that [polarised] effect."

Taking its production constraints and limitations into account, Frake-Waterfield says they've "done very, very well comparatively". The film's success was instrumental in securing a considerably higher budget for *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2*, "which gave us the freedom to do what we wanted and have more interesting and fun things."

THRILL ME HONEY, HONEY

The sequel sees Winnie-the-Pooh and his pals, including Piglet, leave the Hundred Acre Wood to invade the small community of Ashdown, home of the bear's former best friend Christopher Robin – played by *Doctor Jekyll* star Scott Chambers.

"I took this route based on a lot of feedback and critiques," Frake-Waterfield explains. "I put a poll out on my Instagram asking, 'What do you guys actually want to see in a sequel?' A lot of people were saying they liked a woodland setting, which is very traditional horror; you know, cabin in the woods vibes.

"People also liked a kind of urban city, villagey vibe, kind of like what the new *Scream* did. It ended up being 50/50 in the polling, so I thought 'Okay, maybe I'll do a bit of both.'

HONG KONG POOEY

***Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey* was given a week-long cinema release in Hong Kong, before suddenly being pulled. "It was put down to a technical reason," Rhys Frake-Waterfield explains. "But if you google, there is a bit of a ban on Winnie-the-Pooh in China because people have been comparing him to their president. We got indirectly affected by that, I think. It was a bit of a crazy scenario, to be yanked out of a cinema."**

"Excuse me, could I –" "AAAAARGH!"

"We're going on a bear hunt."

"So in this film there's some woodland settings and there's also a kind of Michael Myers-y town invasion happening too."

Frake-Waterfield, who co-wrote the film with Matt "*Summer Of '84*" Leslie, has gathered together an entirely new cast, which won't come as a surprise to viewers of the first instalment... "The performances we've got are very, very good," he enthuses, "and obviously that's crucial. It's why we've got the likes of Simon Callow, Alec Newman, and Scott – people with a lot of credibility and a lot of experience."

Wait, what? Surely not *the* Simon Callow, CBE and Olivier Award winner? Yes, indeedy. Winnie-the-Pooh may finally have met his match in one of the UK's finest actors.

The casting coup came about after Frake-Waterfield saw *Doctor Jekyll*, in which Callow plays a journalist who interviews Chambers's character, Rob. Thinking "he would do something really interesting" with the role of Cavendish, he sent the script to Callow's agent. "They were really interested in the character – there's a lot of depth to him. He ties in heavily with Winnie-the-Pooh's lore and the backstory. So Simon came on board. He's amazing; very compelling."

> **"The look of the creatures, the prosthetics, the gore; that's all stepped up"**

Another benefactor of the budget increase is Winnie-the-Pooh himself. The monsters are kitted out in fully prosthetic masks created by The Prosthetics Studio, whose credits include Voldemort in *Harry Potter*. "I wanted them to move their faces, talk, and interact more," Frake-Waterfield explains. "They can kind of pull expressions."

The company was also charged with crafting the practical effects. "We invested quite a lot of money into the gore because it's a crucial part of the film. People want to see the creatures; they want to see Winnie-the-Pooh doing crazy stuff. So there's a lot of it."

None more so than a climactic set-piece which takes place at a rave. "And then Winnie-the-Pooh turns up," the filmmaker laughs. So much death and gore was filmed that trims were made in the edit.

"It was just constant slaughter. One person after another, this line-up of people getting killed – and it was exhausting. So I actually had to strip elements out and introduce some other moments in there just to let the audience have a minute breather – before it starts again!"

Frake-Waterfield nominates this scene, which features 75 supporting artists, as the most challenging to shoot. "You can imagine how hard that is to achieve as a director when you've got literally a crowd on a micro-budget, but I think we've done something really, really good with it. I'm very excited."

OH BOTHER

Pooh and Piglet are joined by two more of the Hundred Acre Wood's residents in their violent assault on Ashdown: Tigger, who entered public domain in January, and Owl. "It's actually quite challenging to introduce all of these characters," Frake-Waterfield says. "Most movies have one creature, one monster. Michael Myers, the Creeper in *Jeepers Creepers*. All the effort goes into one. The time to make just one of these monsters look good is about three hours. I've got scenes with *four*!"

The filmmaker reveals that Winnie has been awarded a signature weapon. "Freddy's got his hand; Jason's got his machete. I thought, 'What would be fitting for Winnie-the-Pooh?' And then I thought of a bear trap. He's a bear, it's in the woods. It makes sense. There are a few very brutal scenes involving that."

Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2 is a very different beast from its predecessor, with Frake-Waterfield offering assurances that "everything has upped its game. The story is vastly improved, the performances are far, far better. The look of the creatures, the prosthetics, the gore; that's all stepped up a significant amount too," he adds. "It looks way beyond its budget. We're super-excited for it to come out."

A third film is promised/threatened (delete as applicable). "I'm not going to stop because of what critics and reviewers are saying. My plan is to let *Winnie 2* go out there, see what the feedback is, what people liked and didn't like, and then iterate and build on it.

"As the audience stays there and hopefully expands, and the budgets grow, [the films are] only going to improve further and further as we try and grow this into a really solid franchise."

Sweet!

Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2 is in cinemas on 15 March.

HORROR HEROES

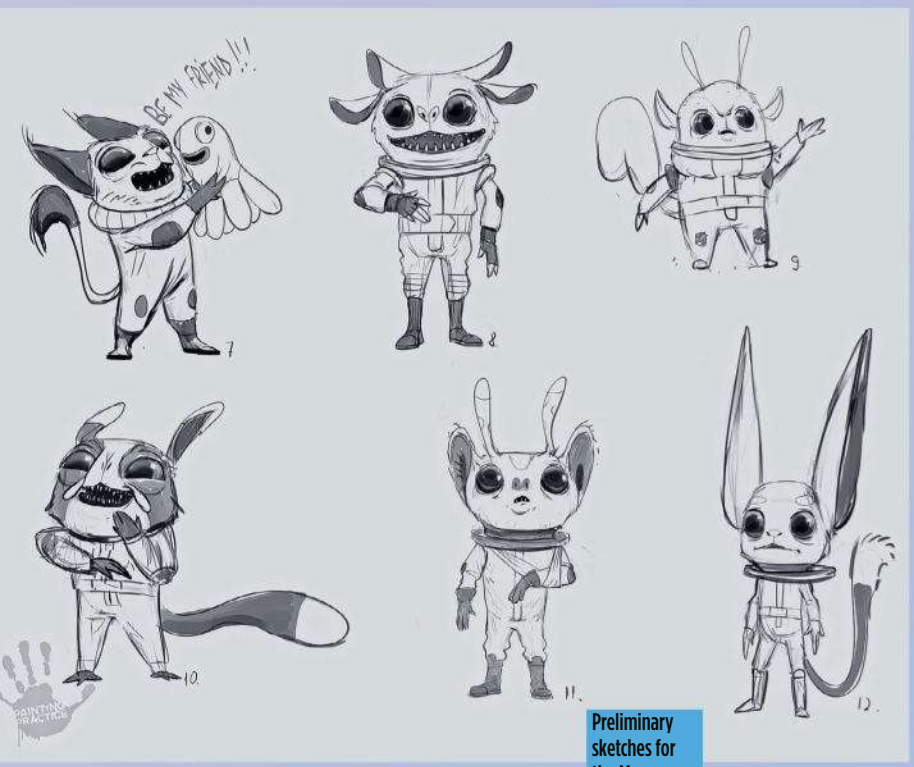
The success of *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey* has afforded Rhys Frake-Waterfield and producer Scott Jeffreys (aka Christopher Robin actor Scott Chambers) the opportunity to meet some of their heroes. "We're both massive horror fans and suddenly we're getting introduced to all these companies, such as Platinum Dunes," Frake-Waterfield says. "They made some of our favourite horror films.

"I absolutely loved T*he Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [2003] as a kid, so it was really weird meeting the creators. They were taking us around their office. We were talking to [producer] Brad Fuller and then he pulled Freddy Krueger's claw out of his backpack – we were like, 'What's that doing in there?' And they had Jason's machetes as well. That was really fun."

DESIGNING DOCTOR WHO

DAN MAY AND ERICA MCEWAN OF WORLDBUILDING DESIGN STUDIO PAINTING PRACTICE SHARE THE VISUAL SECRETS OF "THE STAR BEAST" AND "WILD BLUE YONDER"

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



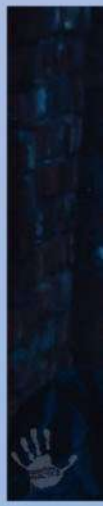
Preliminary sketches for the Meep design.

Even more designs for the good and bad Meep.

Erica McEwan, Creative Director and Graphics Art Director: One of our founders, Joel Collins, is also an exec on *Doctor Who*. We have a good relationship with Bad Wolf after previous productions like *His Dark Materials* and they came to us to find a way to keep the magic of *Doctor Who* and bring it into a new chapter, with the visual storytelling that we do so well. They wanted to take it to a new level.

Another reason the producers were interested in getting us onboard was our traditional relationship between the art department and VFX. We have a digital art department, which is quite a unique thing in terms of design companies.

Dan May, co-founder and VFX Supervisor: Just because of the nature of the show it spans lots of worlds. It's kind of fun sci-fi without taking itself too seriously, and having done *His Dark Materials*, which takes itself very seriously, I was quite up for something a little more playful and fun!



IMAGES: PAINTING PRACTICE

THE MEEP

Dan: The alley picture [below] was the final illustration, where Russell said, "Oh, that's the Meep!" It was done by Raf Martin, who's one of our full-time art directors, and he loves getting into the anatomy of a creature, in a quite granular way.

We were given free rein at the beginning. We looked at the [original *Doctor Who Weekly* comic strip] and said, "Yes, we could do exactly that – but what else could we do?" With most illustrators, to get the best results, you do need to give people a bit of creative freedom, otherwise it can become quite limiting.

This was our first creature, and a good test. We ended up with a physical creature we could have on set and would feel charming, that the actors could react to. Where it needed to evoke more and do things a puppet couldn't do, we recreated it fully with Untold Studios, an absolutely identical CG double with really sophisticated eye movements, mouth shapes and fingers. The concept art was probably the easiest bit. The actual execution of it and how we were going to get it in so many shots on the budget we had was the challenge.

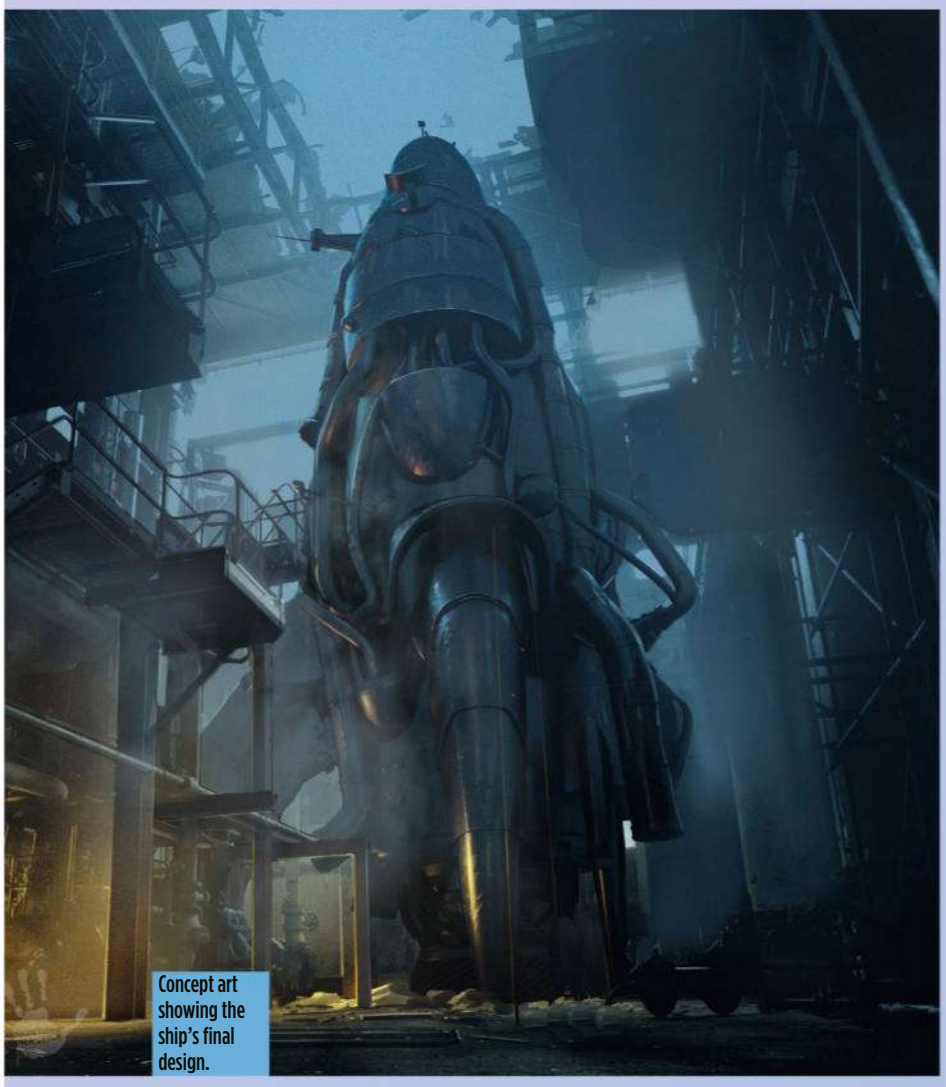
Concept art for scenes featuring the final Meep.

THE MEEP'S ESCAPE POD

Dan: I think we took a location picture and then the pod design was relatively straightforward to do, because it's a ball with a hole in it. Concepts like that can take a matter of hours to do, because they're so simple. In most cases the best design is often quite graphic, not too complicated.

I would hazard a guess that Russell always has a picture in his head and it's about capturing that as quickly as possible. In some instances he'll freely say, "I haven't really thought this one through, and I need some help with it," which is what we're supposed to do. His stage directions are on the money. He is really descriptive and so from a storyboarding and pre-vis perspective it's really useful. I can read his scripts and go, "Right, I know exactly what shots we need..."

Concept art for the Meep's grounded escape pod.



Concept art showing the ship's final design.

THE MEEP'S SPACECRAFT

Dan: We knew we were going to shoot this location because it gave us everything we wanted. So I worked in 3D, with a digital scan of the location. I did this particular model [left], working with a couple of artists.

I took Dave Gibbons's sketch [from the original comic strip] and basically tried to interpret it in 3D, levelling it up to a nowadays sophistication in terms of a Marvelesque spaceship. Then we worked with [production designer] Phil Sims on iterations of that. Ultimately these concepts were the ones that drove the final asset.

We gave them a full model that had been approved in size to go into the location. I think we had to cheat it in certain shots, but for the most part it was a single asset that could be used for all the extension shots. We put thrusters in there, so it had some logic, but we really just made a sexy, believable version of Dave Gibbons's illustration. That was the goal, and I think we pulled it off pretty well.

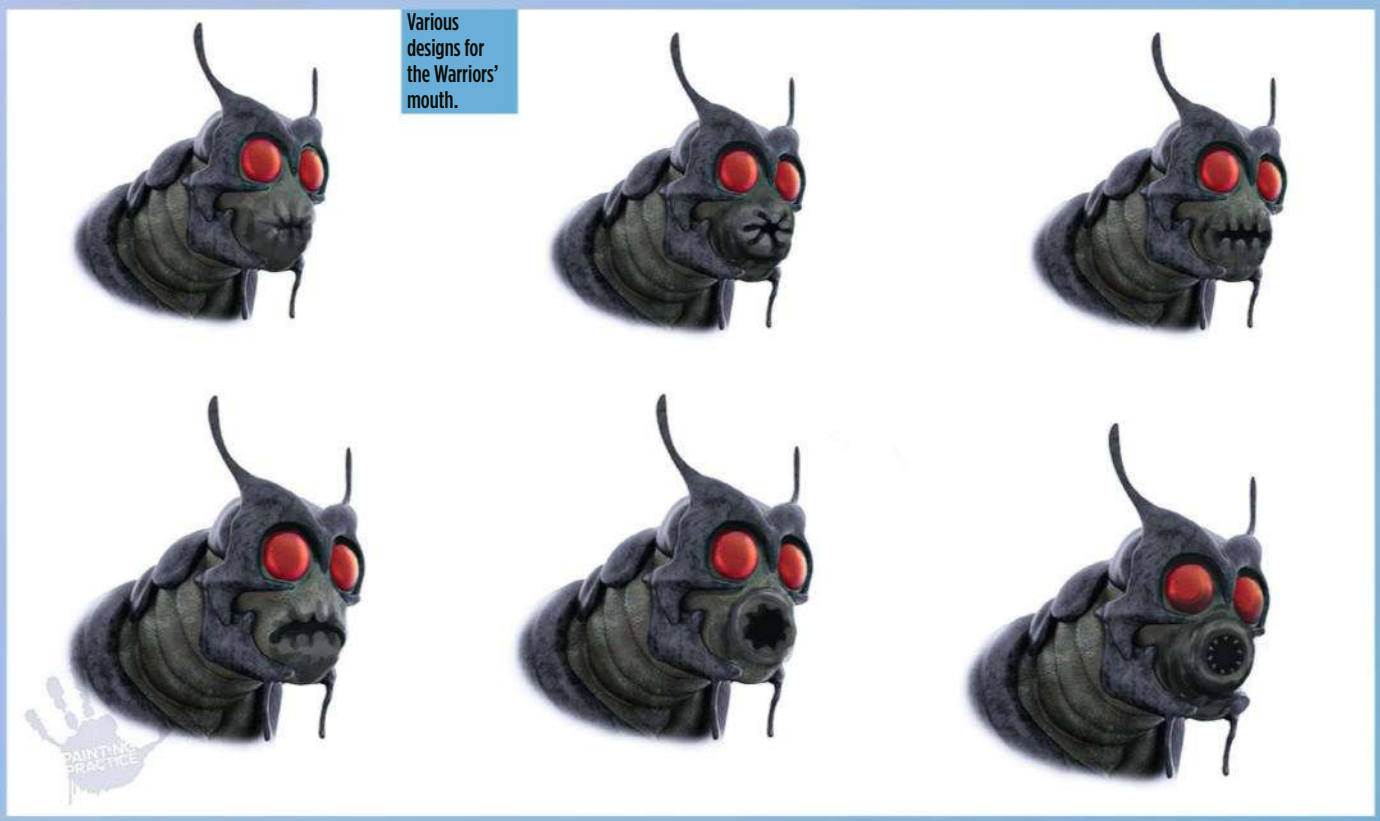
The Meep's ship crashes over London: concept art.

They've got to get humans into these shapes...

THE WRARTH WARRIORS

Erica: There were definitely early conversations around how we could get actors into those suits, with those legs. When you go onto a show that suddenly has a larger VFX budget the temptation is to say "Let's just do them all in CG" – but then you want to strike a balance with the charm of the show. So how can we actually do this?

It's such a big team effort. We're a piece in the middle of it all, collaborating with [prosthetics company] Millennium FX, collaborating with the execs, collaborating with Phil Sims, collaborating with the [VFX] vendors. This artwork is at the heart of it, which is beautiful and informative.



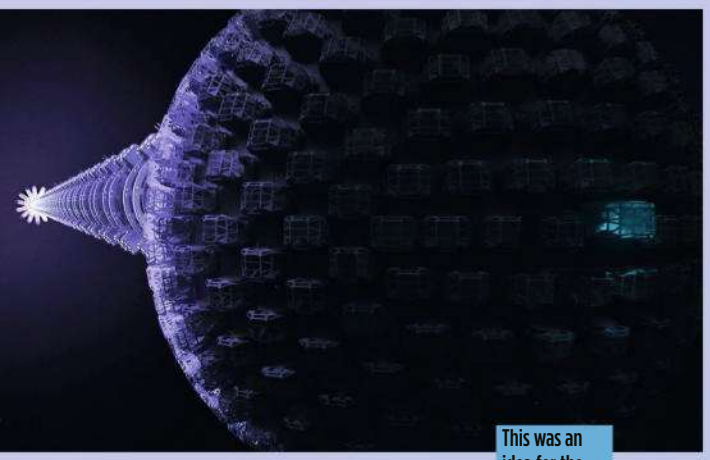
Various designs for the Warriors' mouth.

THE GHOST SHIP

Dan: "Wild Blue Yonder" felt more like *Sunshine* and *Event Horizon*, a horror story on a spaceship. So even though it could still be watched by kids, we could go a little bit more into the scary and the weird. It's definitely a *Doctor Who* episode in terms of its culture, but it also felt like a one-off sci-fi movie.

You can have fun with all the genres in *Doctor Who*. The whole series can have many, many different genres in it. You can't get bored. Every couple of months you're switching heads. If you've got a good idea Russell will definitely listen to it. Sometimes he will go for it, but there's so much to do and so much cool stuff to work out and unpick, you rarely get the chance to do that. With Russell you show him what he's written first, before you pitch anything to him.

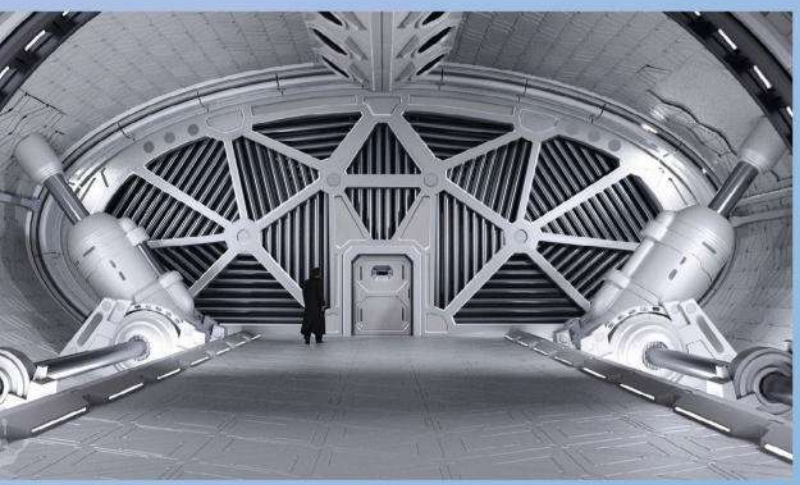
He really likes the way we work, doing cartoons and pre-vis and storyboards of his scripts and set-pieces, and he loves the work of our in-house concept artists. If we show him stuff that he's not sure of, he's very clear! There's not much grey. It's quick to get to where we need to get to, because he's got a really clear opinion on things, which is useful, because of the timeframes involved.



This was an idea for the ship's flight deck.

Unreal Engine real-time renders of the corridor.

Concept art showing the ship's exterior.



THE INFINITE CORRIDOR

Dan: Because of the nature of the set, the corridor was always going to be a tricky undertaking. So we had to get into that creative problem very quickly. If you were to do it with traditional effects it would have been serious money, just because of the sheer volume of shots and the photorealism required. So we had to come up with something slightly more pioneering and a bit risky, but it paid off.

We concepted it early doors in 3D. I very quickly took the concepting phase into [3D game engine] Unreal, so we were conceptualising and art directing it in-engine, which in theory is the first part of the post-production process already. So when we went to the next phase, when we were starting to work with the VFX company and doing camera-tracking tests, testing lighting and testing this rig that allowed us to see the virtual world on camera, we were already quite far on with the design. So in the conceptual phase of the job we get very quickly into 3D and Unreal.

The set incorporates these massive pistons, which I thought was quite fun. The columns were quite chunky, so they could twist. It was almost like a Meccano kit, unmoving, so when it came time to making it move we'd already set it up to do that.

Concept art for the chase scene. Freaked out yet?

THE NOT-THINGS

Dan: David Tennant loved this! I had to get my head around what Russell had written. He was very specific in the script, so it was quite easy to interpret. His descriptions and stage directions are brilliant.

That was one of the two big challenges of the episode, along with the corridor. A lot of it was just David and Catherine, and their performances. To do CG humans is still quite hard, even if you've got mega-money. I don't think anyone's quite done it. It's still not quite there. So for us it was actually useful that they were weird and not quite right, so you could be uncanny.

The way the scenes were shot also helped, where we see them very, very fast, with lots of moves and lots of motion blur. Because they are very complicated. The hardest thing was that nearly everything that they did rarely got any reuse. If we were doing a show where the Not-Things were part of the series, we could make up a lot of assets and you'd get to reuse them again, but half the assets were used in one or two shots, so we had to be quite clever about how much we used them and which ones we could do in-camera.

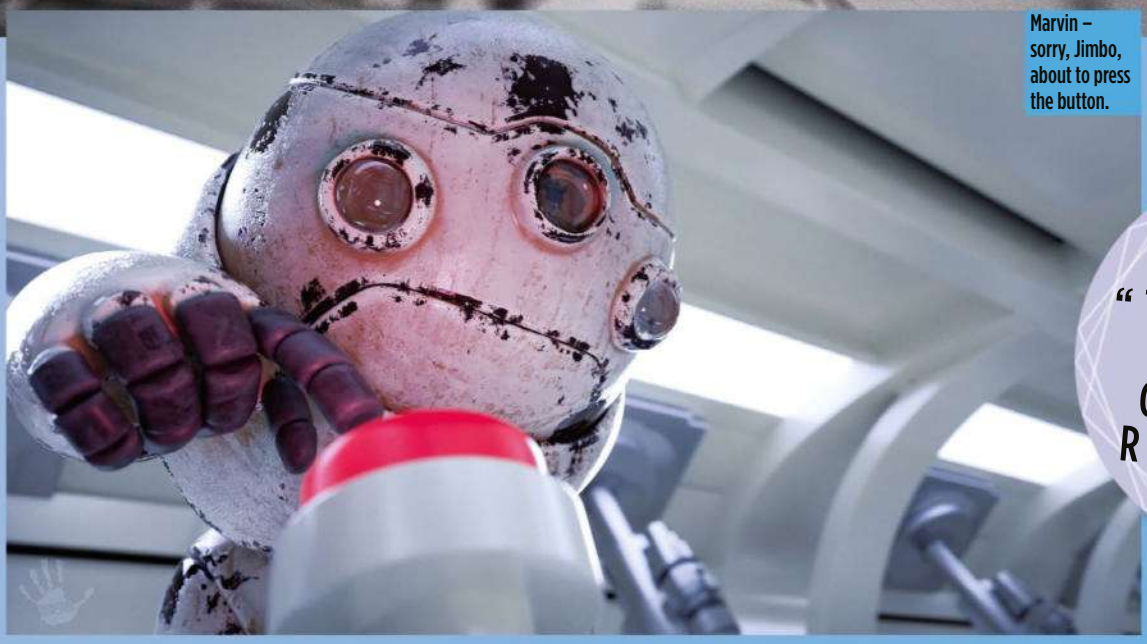
"Here I am with a brain the size of a planet..."

JIMBO

Dan: Joel and I did the movie of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. We were like, "It's just Marvin, isn't it?" So we just reinvented Marvin. Joel and I are still big fans of that simple visual language and chunky design. Obviously Phil Sims had a take on it. Jimbo has more of a body than Marvin, with that shoulder part, and there's the whole nose/lens thing...

Erica: When you whittle it down, it's so minimal you have nowhere to hide. That's the beauty in character design, getting the angle of the mouth just right, or the eyes in just the right place. Suddenly you change the mood.

Dan: When we are all involved in the visual development with Phil, where possible I'll push to those simple graphic rules as quickly as possible. At first it's just a silhouette, which is an animation thing. I think one of our strengths as a company is our background in both disciplines, live-action and animation, because there are quite a lot of overlaps. Those genres are moving more and more together as time goes on.



Marvin – sorry, Jimbo, about to press the button.

NEXT ISSUE

"THE GIGGLE" AND "THE CHURCH ON RUBY ROAD"

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer and Disney+.

DESIGNING FOUNDA

For decades, many a screenwriter and filmmaker found the task of adapting Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novels for film – with their mind-bogglingly high concept sci-fi ideas and world-building – impossible to do. It took the advent of the latest golden age of television, with its big budgets and ambition, plus major advancements in visual effects, for David S Goyer to nail the assignment with his Apple TV+ series.

Production designer Rory Cheyne tells *SFX* that even before production was complete on the recent second season, he was already preparing for the third season, researching Goyer's locale, vehicle and set-piece needs. However, he believes that it's going to take a lot to best what he and his team achieved in season two. Here he looks back at some of his favourite creations, with illustrations by him.

The Ignis Summer Palace. Very swanky.

A funeral taking place in the Summer Palace.

COMBINING CREATIONS

Foundation is teeming with so many entirely invented worlds, technologies and concepts, and it falls to Cheyne to translate all of it into a grounded reality. Three seasons into that process, he says "It was a challenge to get through season one and set this style. Now, it's getting easier to come up with these objects."

Cheyne says that for season two, Goyer provided him a beat sheet of new and existing planets, environments, ships and key set-pieces needed for the narrative. "I have three piles: the spaceship pile, the built-set pile that are going to go into studio sets, and then the location pile. Some of those piles filter together.

"For example, Ignis was a world that we were going to land on and stay there for a while. We needed a beach and an ocean, and I knew we were reshooting sets that had been already built in the Canaries. For the jungle, I know we're going to end up in the Czech Republic where I built a lot of sets. Then I had to blend the Czech Republic and the Canary Islands together cohesively so that they look like you're on the same planet. That was a design challenge, for sure."

More designs for the Summer Palace.

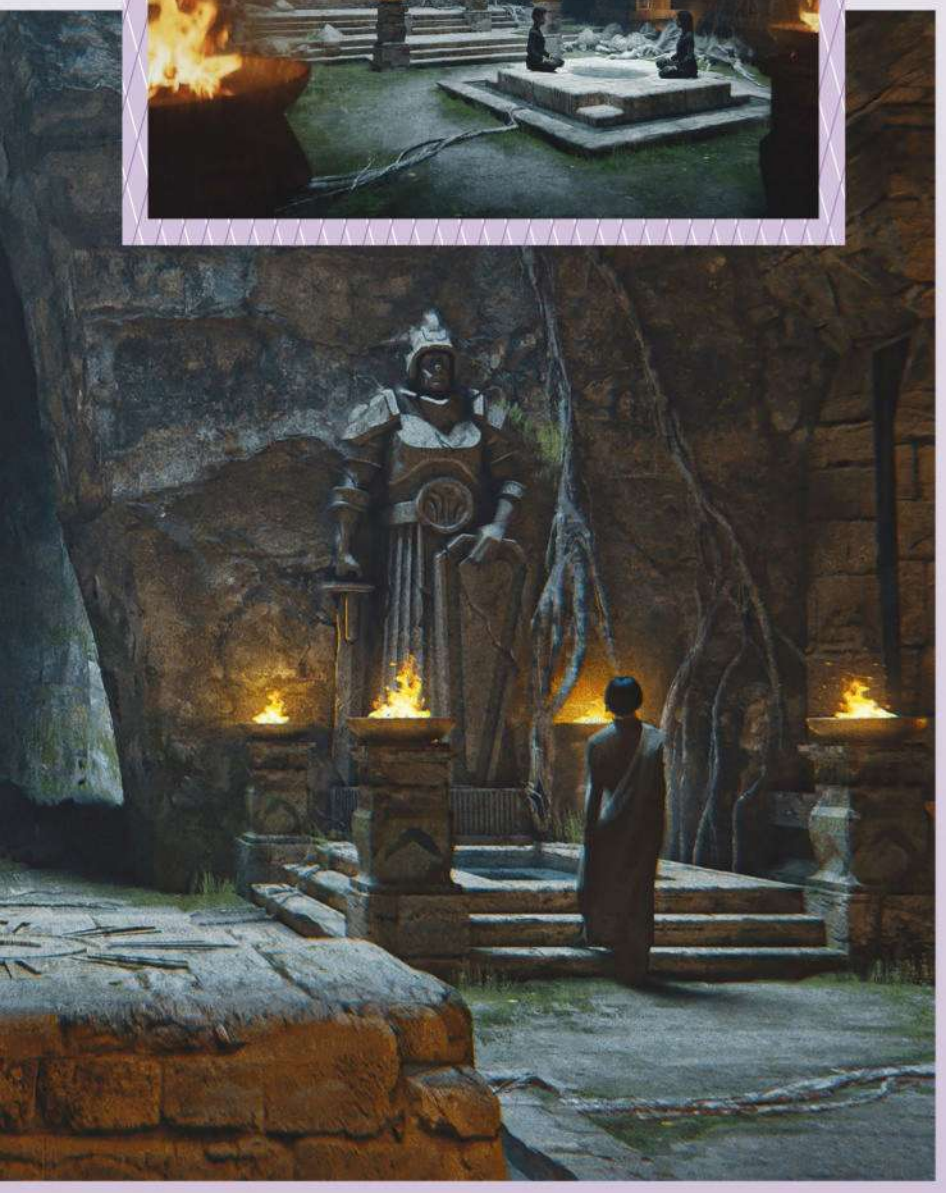
***FOUNDATION* PRODUCTION DESIGNER RORY CHEYNE REVEALS THE SECRETS OF BRINGING ISAAC ASIMOV'S SEMINAL SCI-FI SAGA TO LIFE**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

TION

Cloud Dominion Mothership. It's *big*...

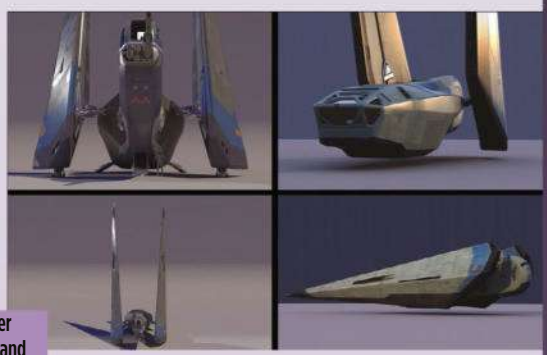
Summer Palace interior. Very cosy.



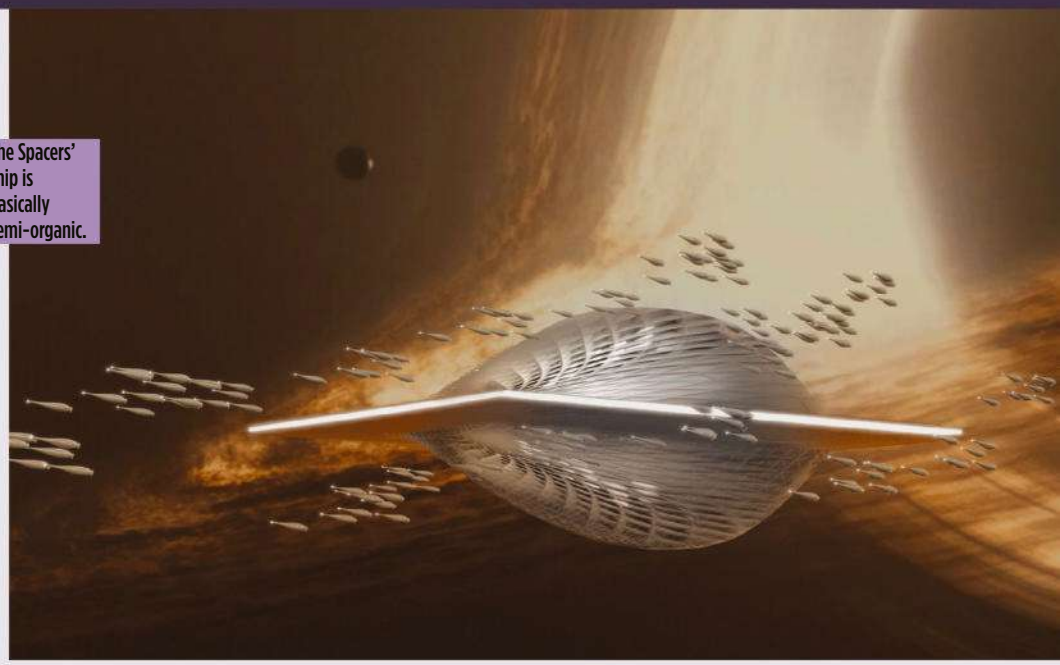
THE QUEEN'S MOTHERSHIP

With more intergalactic travel featured in the season, Cheyne conceptualised from scratch a variety of ships that would introduce new species and communities into the story. For example, Queen Sareth of Cloud Dominion travels to Trantor in a Mothership unlike anything previously featured in the series.

"The description of these people in the script was that they had a lot of different colours because they brought these pigments to the planet," Cheyne says. "I just thought of jellyfish and peacocks and chandeliers; really beautiful objects. I wanted to create something that you would look at and you wouldn't say spaceship. You would say it's more like a piece of jewellery." Reflecting the Queen it carries, the ship has an underbelly that's glass-like, with a top of protective armour. "It's trying to put across some of the character's sensibilities into the ship," Cheyne explains.



The Whisper Ship (top) and Cloud Dominion shuttle interior.



The Spacers' ship is basically semi-organic.

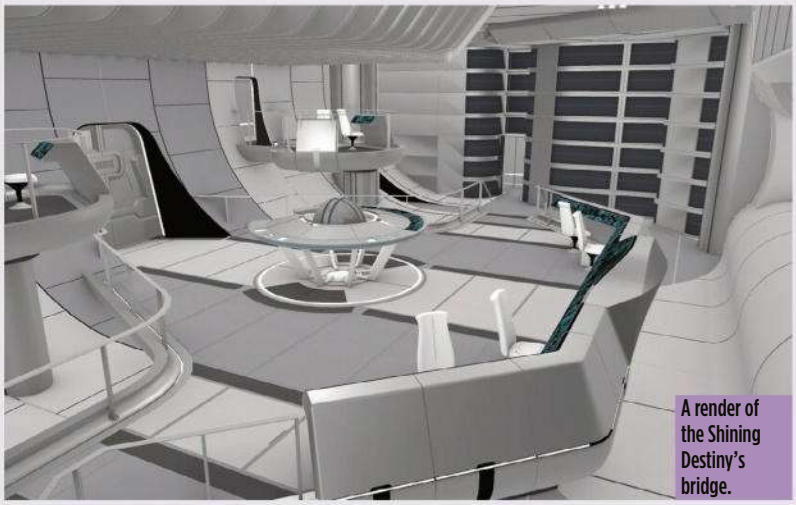
THE SPACERS

The Empire's navigators, the Spacers, are some of the most esoteric figures introduced. "They are one character that's a bit hard to grasp physically," says Cheyne. "Like, where they come from and what do they use to build with, because they're in space with kind of nothing.

"We were always talking about how they manipulate their bodies, and change the way they look because they have frail bones, almost like birds. I thought the ship would have been something they may have harvested, some sort of material from a moon, and they grew this ship. So I looked at parametric architecture [which draws on natural forms] for their ship."

A large chamber inside the ship.

Airlock in the Spacers' ship, with figure for scale.

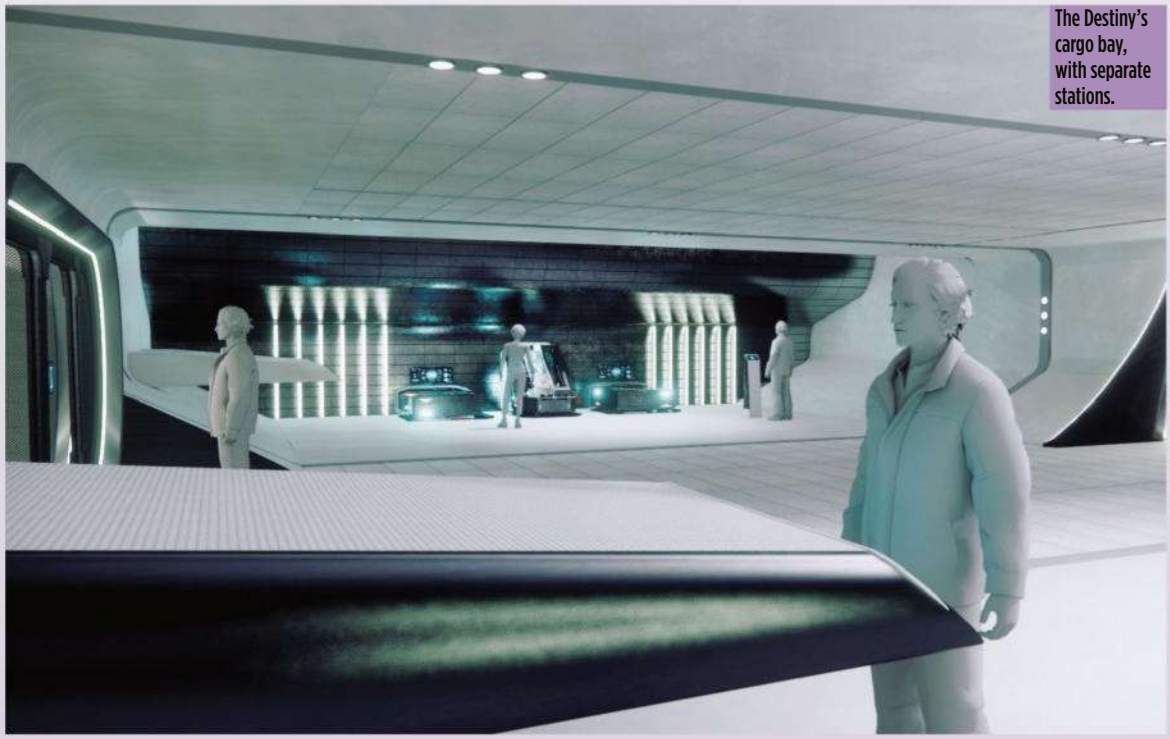


A render of the Shining Destiny's bridge.

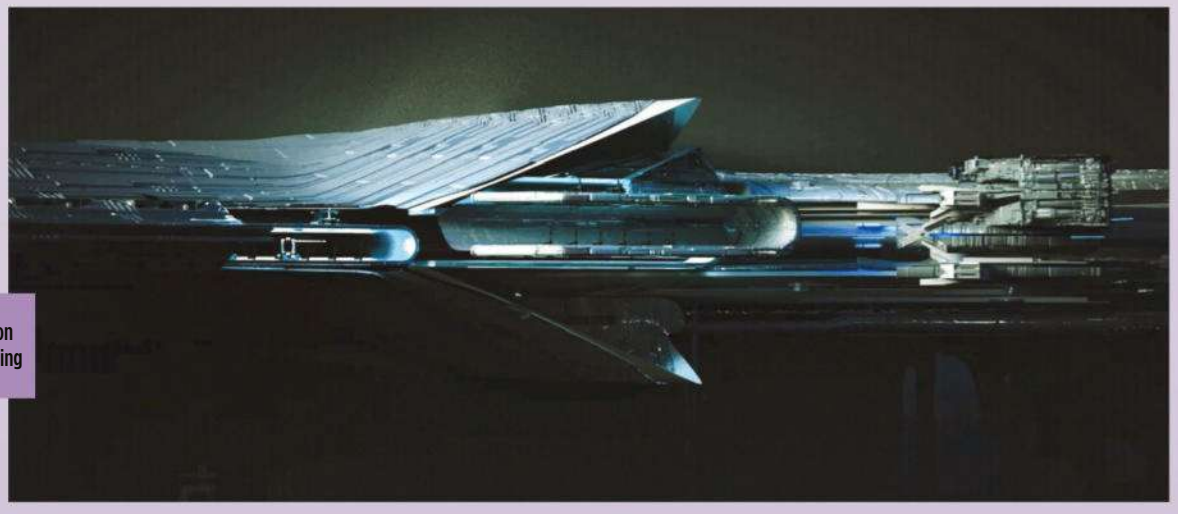
THE SHINING DESTINY

The imposing Imperial warship sent to wipe out the Foundation and its allied worlds, the Shining Destiny is meant to reflect the might and will of the Emperor. "We said that the crew would be in the thousands," Cheyne explains. "And it held maybe 1,000 fighter ships within, so we needed *a lot* of space to play."

Cheyne was adamant about not following typical sci-fi ship tropes. "Obviously, we needed the bridge. But one thing I was trying to do is shy away from your typical *Star Trek* model where everybody sits. I wanted to have more standing, where people could just walk around to help with the scenes that had to play out in that set. Then putting people at different levels, so we just feel the scale of the ship. We had lots of hallways to make it feel large. We didn't have a huge footprint, but I think it came across that it felt like they were travelling from one side to the other, to the airlock and back to the bridge. There was a lot of action to unfold in those sets."



The Destiny's cargo bay, with separate stations.



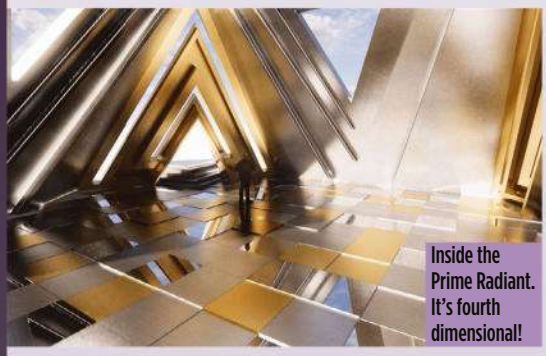
Exterior visualisation of the Shining Destiny.

HARI'S REPOSITORIES

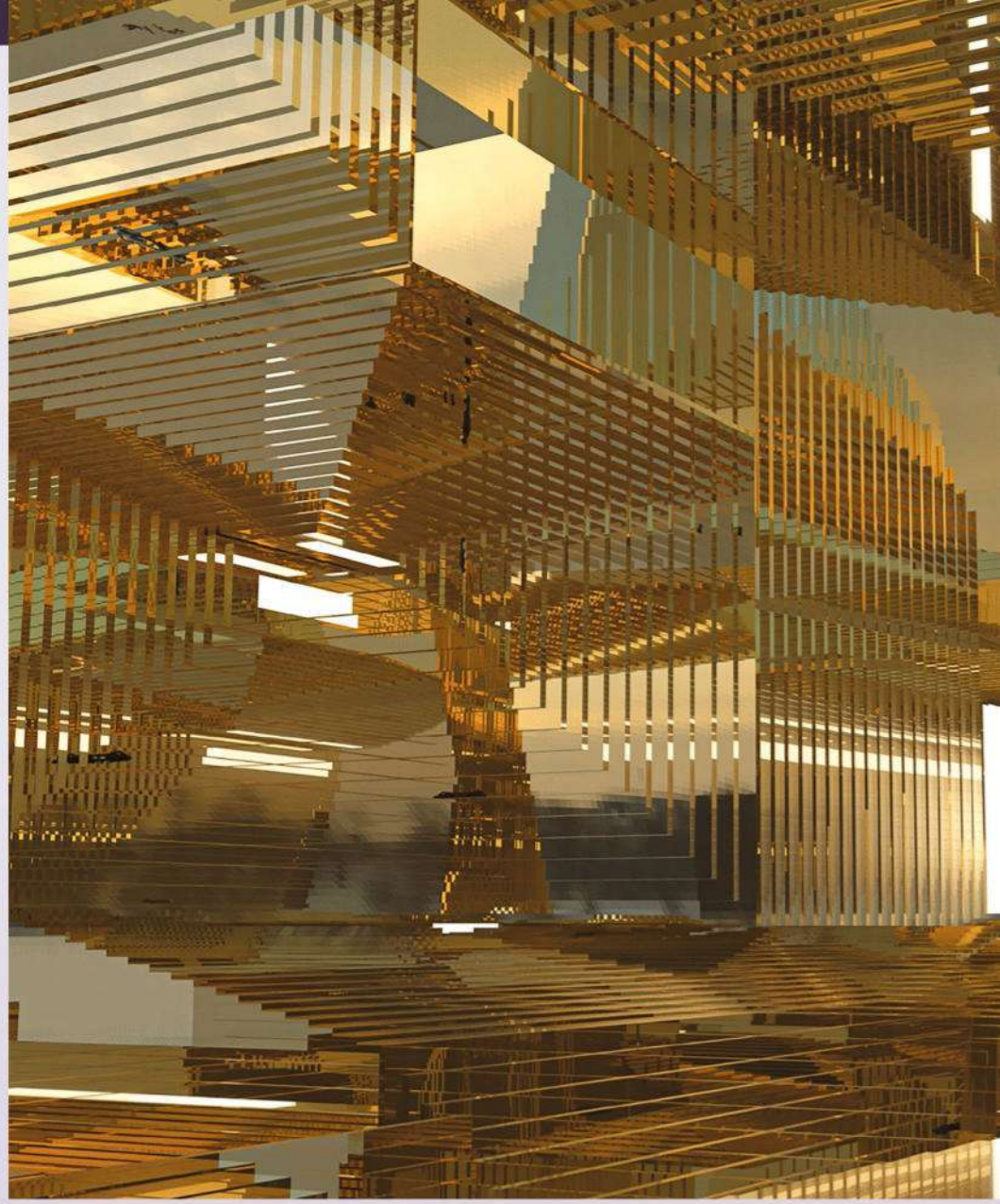
The return of Hari Seldon (Jared Harris) to the story meant Cheyne had to turn the repositories of the mathematician's theory into physical spaces. "The interior Vault and interior Prime Radiant were hard sets to wrap my mind around, because they're fourth-dimensional sets with no limits of space," Cheyne explains. "The one thing we had to do is say that the architect of the Prime Radiant is the same architect of the Vault, so we used some of those spaces for double duty.

"The set consisted of a large hallway with this octagonal room that was all made of glass – like a two-way mirror – so you could actually get underneath the set and walk and see their feet, and that was a prism-like space," Cheyne continues. "Then we had a staircase set that was just like massive stairs that went in every sort of direction. We did a lot of visual effects to extend that.

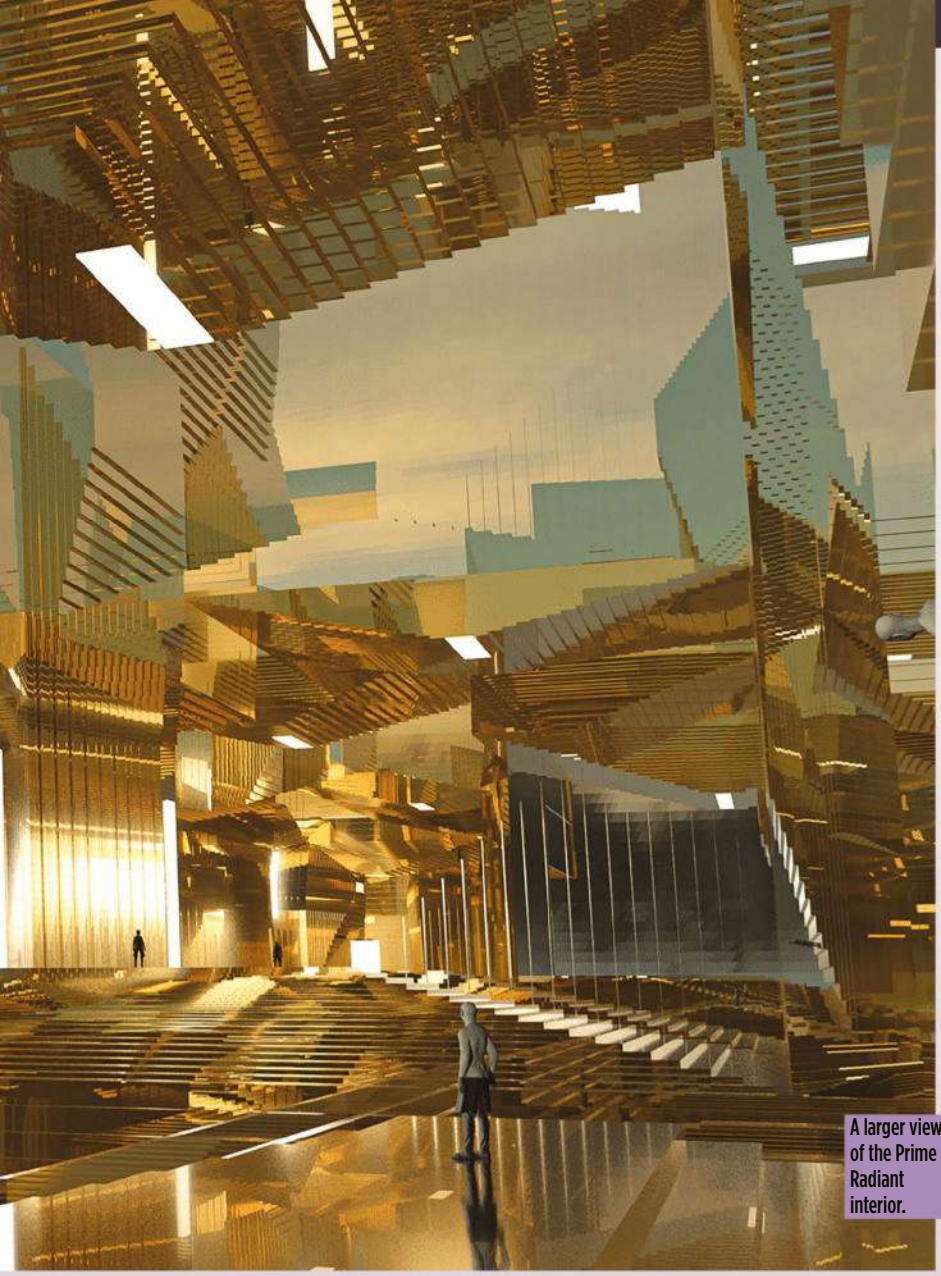
"Then we had a bunch of moving sets. They were just small pieces of glass, or pieces of steel, with this texture that Hari could walk on, over and through. I called it the 'Zen Space' where it was a combination of all the sets, architecturally, in one space."



Inside the Prime Radiant. It's fourth dimensional!



The mural in the Palace is updated each season.



A larger view of the Prime Radiant interior.

Various views of Demerzel's prison, with circle motif.

DEMERZEL'S PRISON

When asked which second season set is his proudest achievement, Cheyne cites Demerzel's prison. "I love the architect Carlo Scarpa, so I'd referenced some of his details in the Empire's Palace in season one, and I continued that through," he says.

"When I was presented with this hidden cell in the basement of the palace, I wanted to create almost a jewel box in the basement, with these circles that harken back to Tomba Brion [a family tomb designed by Scarpa]. I was able to find this amazing staircase location in Prague, with this green marble and chandelier that travelled down through the centre of the staircase. It was a great tie-in with the material."

Cheyne explains that they stitched that location staircase with a studio set featuring a reproduction of the chandelier. "Then you take a turn and you're presented with this golden box within this marble room."

The Emperor's palace is not a bad place to be.

THE PALACE'S LIVING MURAL

Being the visual history of the Cleon clones, the mural in the Emperor's palace is a living document that Cheyne updates every season. Based on the events of the scripts, Cheyne presents Goyer with rough pencil drawings of key events, in the established Futurist style.

"When I first started designing the mural in season one, I looked at styles of Italian Futurists from 1918 to 1920, and David really wanted that style to just continue," Cheyne explains.

"As the Empire is trying to stay the same, they don't change the style of their art. They don't go to Cubist, or Modernist or Surrealist. They just stay with their style, year after year."

Foundation is on Apple TV+.

DIRECTOR VINCENZO NATALI EXPLAINS HOW THE SHOOT FOR '90S PUZZLE-HORROR CUBE NEARLY KILLED HIM – BOTH FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY...

WORDS: **SIMON BLAND**

SQUA

RED TO BEAT

Rennes (Wayne Robson) on acid.

Things get all too much for the remaining survivors.

BUILT ON A PREMISE as concise as its title, claustrophobic psychological horror *Cube* did a whole lot with very little.

It introduced us to a group of strangers who wake to find themselves trapped in their own cube-shaped prisons. Before they can figure out who has caged them and why, their mystery cubes start fighting back, punishing each incorrect escape attempt with vicious booby traps and inventive and frequently bloody kills.

27 years later, the afterlife of director Vincenzo Natali's debut remains as alluring as ever. Spawning two direct sequels and a Japanese remake, its fingerprints can be found all over the gore-flecked "consequence horrors" of the early noughties. In hindsight, it feels like *Cube* sliced so that films like James Wan's *Saw* franchise could dice – a pretty apt and deserving legacy for a movie that was so tricky to make it nearly killed its director.

"What really excited me about the idea for *Cube* was that I felt like I hadn't seen it before," Natali tells *SFX*, casting his mind back to when he first stumbled upon the idea as a movie-bingeing film student at the Canadian Film Centre. Inspired by minimalist classics like Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, Natali's initial thought process led him into surreal territory before he landed on the lean simplicity that made *Cube* a cult hit.

"The first draft I wrote was more like a Terry Gilliam film," he explains, detailing an early take that filled its mathematical puzzle-prisons with chartered accountants instead of the random array of confused faces we ultimately end up meeting. "There was a Minotaur in the maze and stuff that grew on the walls that you could eat," adds Natali. "It was far more fanciful."

Thankfully, his co-writer André Bijelic quickly reined his partner back in: "André said, 'It's a great idea but you're missing out on what makes it special, which is its simplicity. Just make it about these people who have nothing but the clothes on their back, their minds or their physical ability and the clock is ticking,'" he recalls. "If they don't get out, they'll die of thirst or starvation. That gave us a North Star to follow."

Despite having never helmed a movie before, Natali aimed high for what would become his first – a low-budget piece created through the Canadian Film Centre's "first feature project". Still, he methodically planned it all out to avoid any on-set hiccups. "I thought, 'Why not make it a maze of identical rooms?'" he says of the film's scope. "Budgeting was the seed of inspiration behind the whole thing but of course, once we started writing, it actually became rather expensive."

After securing some top-up funding and wangling a few favours to help with special effects, Natali hired production designer Jasna Stefanovic to create the cubes featured in the movie, based on a design by mathematician David W Pravica.

Building just one full cube, Stefanovic then re-skinned it with different coloured lighting effects to give the impression that it was actually multiple, interconnected cubes, each containing a different prisoner and trap.

"The cube set itself was actually very complex. It was quite big, 14 feet by 14 feet, and it was raised four feet off of the ground so you could get through the door on the floor and light it from all sides," says Natali about the logistics of shooting in the cube. "Because it was a symmetrical environment, it required something anti-symmetrical that was chaotic, so Jasna designed beautiful archaic patterns on the walls which we took as being the camouflage for the traps. Also, on an aesthetic level, it broke up the monotony of the environment."

> **"I wasn't sleeping and I looked skeletal by the end of it, but it was worth it"**

With the bulk of his action taking place inside cubes, Natali thought he could make life easier by shooting in chronological order, something rarely done on movie sets.

Unfortunately, fate had other ideas. "It should have been wonderful but it really wasn't," he says. "I thought nothing unexpected could happen because we had designed the space and I had storyboarded and meticulously planned every shot. Then, on the first day, the doors to the cube wouldn't open."

With even the strongest member of his cast unable to shift the cube's heavy doors, it wasn't long before the movie's executive producer threatened to shut down production before day one had even wrapped. "The whole movie is about opening and closing doors. There's no scene except one that doesn't have that, so my plans to shoot in order immediately got thrown out the window," he says. "It was a disaster that

The Crystal Maze was never this fraught.

OUT OF THE BOX

Life outside the cube is overrated

In *Cube*, Vincenzo Natali was determined never to show who or what shadowy figure was responsible for building the prison and selecting its unfortunate inmates – but the powers that be had other ideas.

"When Trimark bought the film at Sundance, they wanted an answer. They wanted us to go out of the cube," explains the filmmaker. "The Canadian Film Centre wanted to see outside of the cube too, so we shot something, but it was awful," adds Natali.

"It was a brief prelude to the whole film and literally the first thing that got cut. Hopefully that footage has been destroyed." While convinced an American remake would never remain so ambiguous, Natali believes this lack of explanation adds weight: "It gives people something to ponder and mentally chew on."

Quentin (Maurice Dean Wint) has some issues.

NOTHING COMPARES TO CUBE

Vincenzo Natali explains why he's never returned...

After *Cube*, Natali launched a filmmaking career that has seen him helm 2009's body-horror *Splice* and episodes of *Guillermo del Toro's Cabinet Of Curiosities*. However, while it feels like his debut may have "franchise" written all over it, he's not tempted to return to it just yet. "I would if I had an idea of what a good sequel would be, but I can't think of one," he admits. Plus, while making his first film was an endurance trial, Natali had full creative control, something that's hard to come by in the Hollywood machine. "*Cube* was the best and worst thing because it set the bar so high. It became really hard to make a second or third film and it continues to be hard because I never want to lower the bar," says Natali. "If anything, I want to go higher than *Cube*."

became the first in a series of small disasters that kept destroying my plans."

Undeterred, Natali improvised. Switching gears, he shot a prolonged dialogue scene that didn't involve any opening or closing doors – but trouble followed him. "The cube was huge and almost fell on me," he reveals. "I was almost crushed by my own cube, which really could've killed me.

"At the end of every day, I'd go out for dinner with my cinematographer and rip stuff out of the script that I knew I was never going to get to do," he adds. "It was an excruciating experience for me. I wasn't sleeping and I looked skeletal by the end of it, but it was worth it."

Still, it wasn't all chaos. When things finally decided to work, there were moments that showed real promise. "It was really fun designing different ways to kill people, but doing it in an artful way. We didn't want to just be gross," admits Natali.

Perhaps the most memorable cube-killing arrives just minutes in, when the first prisoner we meet is, uh, cubed by swinging razor wire that swooshes through him like a knife through hot butter. "When we wrote that, we thought it'd have to be a digital effect, but we had a wonderful make-up department in Toronto that built a brilliant silicone replica of Julian Richings who played that character," remembers the director.

"It was basically composed of bricks that we piled up. During our last shot of our last day, we pulled out the bottom piece and he fell apart perfectly."

Looking back, it's easy to see how the inventiveness of *Cube*'s more sinister moments influenced the ultra-gore showcased in the horror films that arrived in its wake. "I'll take all credit for any slice-and-dice deaths that followed," laughs Natali. "I feel like we were the first film to cube a human being, and we certainly weren't the last."

"What's this hideous creature looking at us?"

What's more, his dedication to keeping the prison's creators and their motives a mystery kept fans rapt. "As we were working on it, we felt like there was no explanation for this place, and if you ever did get an answer, it'd be a letdown," admits Natali. "We didn't feel beholden to give away the big picture and I think that gave the movie a kind of weight, because that's what our lives are like.

"We're trapped in this world, we don't know how it works, we meet enemies and allies and have to negotiate our way through. It gave it a mystery and significance," he reasons. "It was a version of Hell, but one far away from the classic Dante version."

After surviving *Cube*'s shoot, Natali wasn't sure what to make of the film he'd spent so much time and energy creating. "I was prepared to die for this movie, I'm not even joking. I was ready to do *anything* to get that movie made," he tells *SFX*.

"After I'd finished shooting and editing, it was so far from this pristine vision that I had in my mind when I planned it that I couldn't see what was good about it. I could only see the things that were wrong. Then, to my surprise, it became this success – albeit a slow, underground success."

After a warm if small debut, *Cube*'s legacy gradually began to grow, and eventually this ambitious indie found intense popularity overseas, leading to a foreign remake and even more fans. For Natali, *Cube*'s afterlife has been quite surreal.

"I never in my wildest imagination thought we'd be talking about this a quarter of a century later," he smiles. "As the years have gone on, I've learned to embrace accidents and look for things outside of my plan. That was a good lesson, and *Cube* taught me that."

Cube is on DVD, Blu-ray and Prime Video.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

J MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

Protest and survive: *Babylon 5*'s creator tells us about his new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Peter Konerko

BY HIS OWN ESTIMATION, J MICHAEL Straczynski has "always been a mutt". It's his self-deprecating way of describing how he works in different media. "I write novels, comics, movies, TV shows... I suck at poetry," says the creative powerhouse behind *Babylon 5*, a series which (and this may depress older readers) has just turned 30.

Straczynski doesn't, however, suck at longer-form prose, as his new novel *The Glass Box*, a near-future tale of the power of making a stand and what happens when the authorities abuse the mental health system to push back, proves. "We are taught every day that you can't fight city hall, one person can't make a difference and just let it go," says Straczynski. "I don't believe that."

Neither does the book's protagonist Riley Diaz, someone who understands the risks of putting herself in harm's way. This is because civil disobedience demands discipline. Straczynski saw this first hand when, "by sheer coincidence", he was in Times Square as the Occupy Wall Street movement gathered there in October 2011.

"I have never seen that many police and police cars in one place in my life," he remembers. The authorities' presence was "intimidating" but, for the protestors, reacting was not an option. "The organisers were constantly reinforcing with bull horns, 'Do not take action, do not raise hands, do not throw things, keep this peaceful,'" he recalls.

In *The Glass Box*, an authoritarian regime takes another tack by setting up American Renewal Centers, psychiatric hospitals where protestors are reeducated. This lets Straczynski ask "a theological question": if you presuppose mental illness among protestors, as if taking a stand is a mark of instability, "Where do you go from here?"

KESEY DOES IT

Structurally, the book has parallels with *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, something Straczynski nods to by making one of the medics, Nurse Biedermann, an essentially decent person – the point being to make her unlike Nurse Ratched in Ken Kesey's novel, who is "sheer unmitigated evil".

Less expected are the references to *Frankenstein* and the movies that used Mary Shelley's novel as source material. He explains that this came about when one of the characters, Steve Newman, mentioned a traumatised patient nicknamed "Frankenstein". When writing, Straczynski always knows the direction of travel but "I always leave myself room to be open to surprise." His characters "have their own lives and their own minds", so it's as if he's just transcribing. Straczynski's own past probably plays in here too. He read the book at school and was "surprised at how literate [the creature] was". He's also a longtime fan of Universal horror films, and recalls meeting Wolf Man creator Curt Siodmak. According to Siodmak, Universal's cadre of monster feature writers all tried to kill off Frankenstein's monster in ways that made things difficult for the next scriptwriter. "That's why he always died so horribly!"

This anecdote underlines how Straczynski is at heart a fan. Another recent project has involved him, as literary executor, bringing the works of New Wave luminary Harlan Ellison (a conceptual consultant on *Babylon 5*) back into print – beginning with a Greatest Hits collection.

GENEROUS VISIONS

Ellison had a reputation for being difficult. This was because "he was undiagnosed bipolar," Straczynski says. The Ellison he prefers to remember was "the kindest person I've ever known", someone who often "loaned" money to friends when he knew he'd never get it back.

On Sundays, Ellison liked to have brunch at a downtown dim sum restaurant in LA. "Being Harlan, he didn't want to take freeways," remembers Straczynski. "He liked taking back alleys and certain surface streets, and going into parts of town where you should never ever, ever go."

On one journey, Straczynski remembers driving past an "African-American woman sitting on the curb" – a down-and-out. Ellison "slammed on the brakes", jumped out "where you should not get out of the car" and gave the woman a roll of notes. It wasn't the only time Ellison stopped. "That was my friend," says Straczynski.

In the present, he's as busy as ever. He's been working on a *Babylon 5* reboot (status: in limbo) plus other TV, film and audio projects. He's working on another novel. And as a comics writer, he's been going back through Captain America's timeline to the '30s, showing Steve Rogers meeting the Nazis of the German American Bund.

Straczynski relishes the idea of using this approach to "by boomerang effect talk about American Nazis now". This is, he points out, in keeping with a character who "was punching Hitler in the face" before the USA entered the war. "Jack Kirby and Joe Simon were in New York at a time that the Nazis were doing stuff," he says as we return to the subject of politics, "and they saw what was coming."

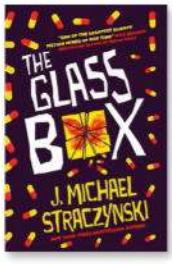
The Glass Box is published by Titan Books on 19 March.

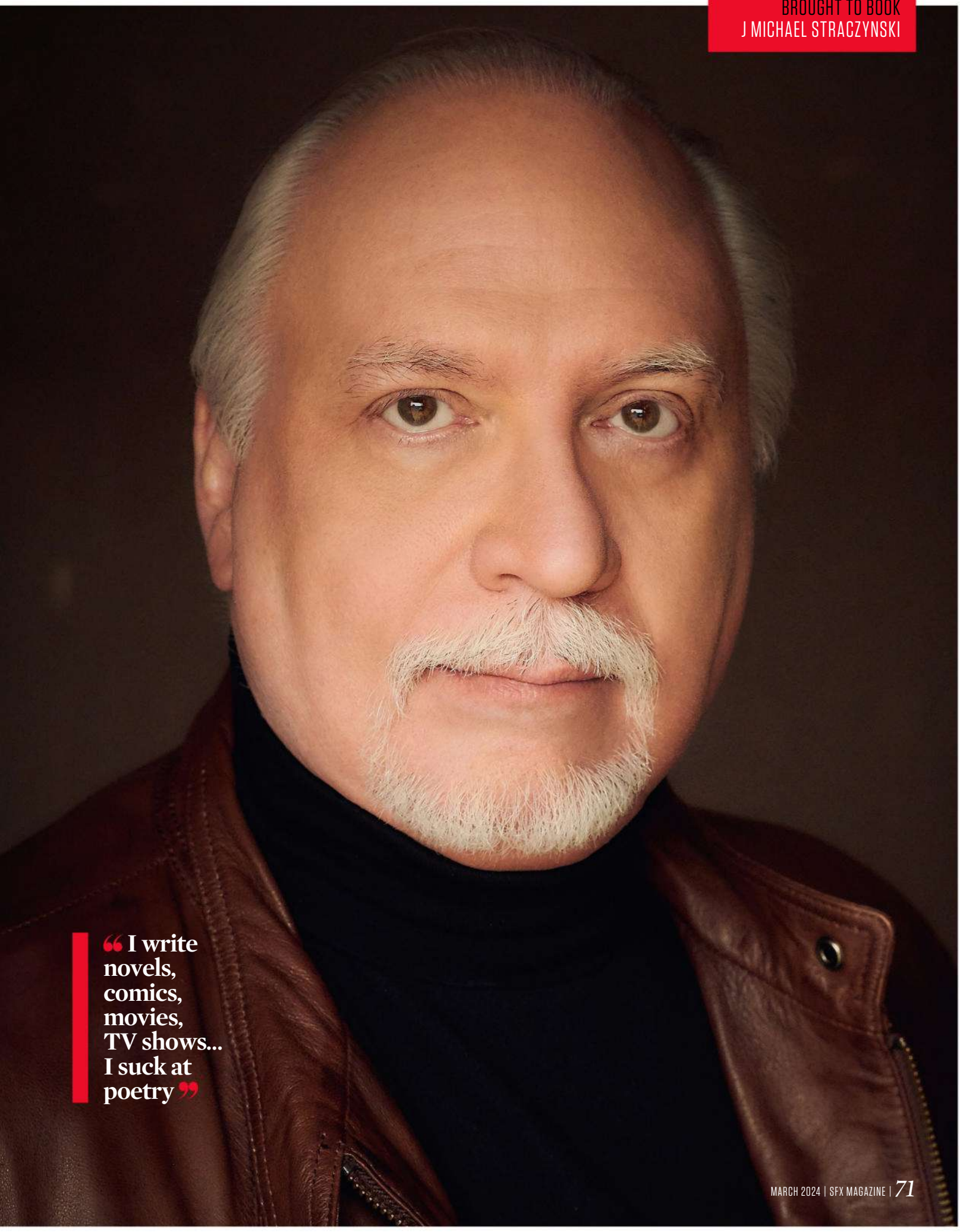
BIODATA

From **Paterson, New Jersey**

Greatest Hits
***Babylon 5* is one of the most influential SF TV series of all time. Straczynski has written comics featuring the likes of Spider-Man, Thor and Superman. He's also the author of five novels and a memoir, *Becoming Superman: My Journey From Poverty To Hollywood* (2019).**

Random Fact
Straczynski recently had Covid. Although he's now recovered, "brain fog" left him unable to write for the first time since he was 17.



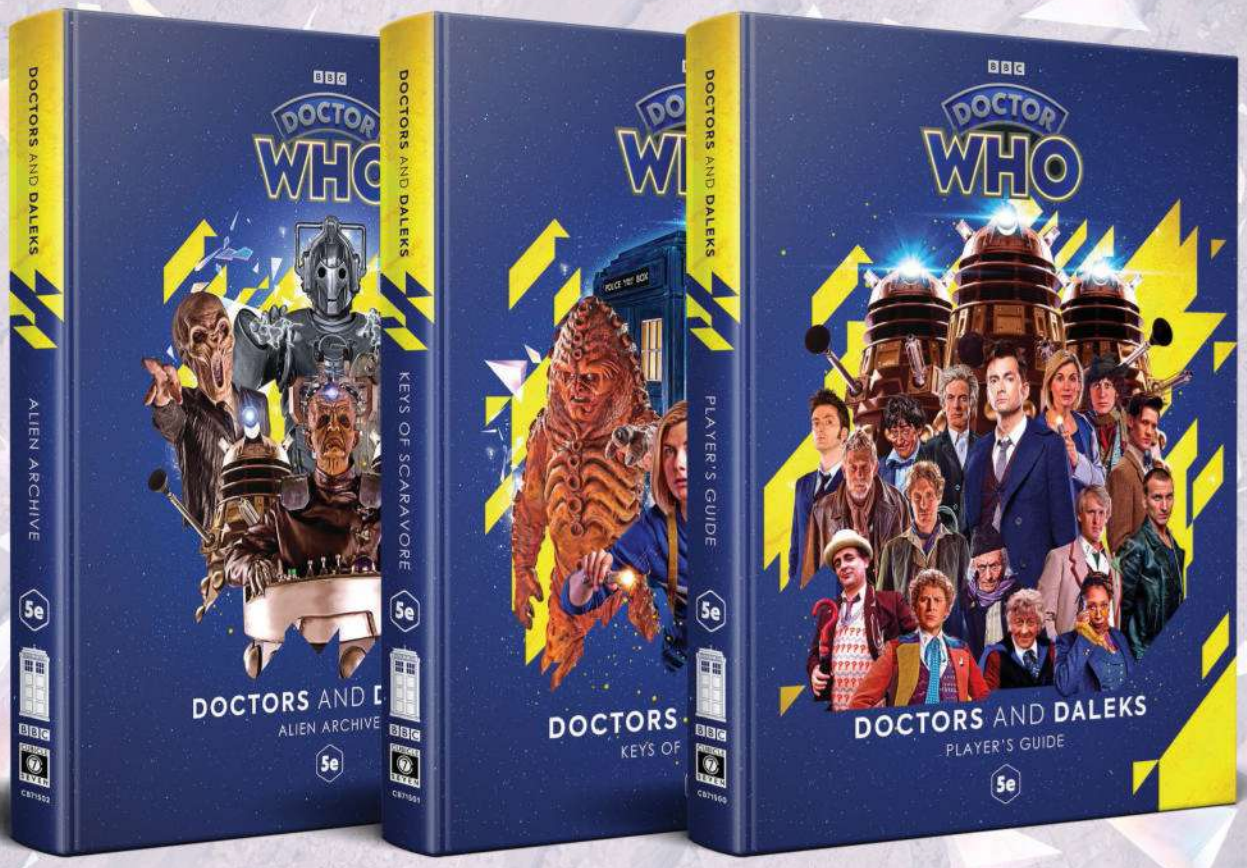


“I write novels, comics, movies, TV shows... I suck at poetry”

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

DOCTORS AND DALEKS



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MARCH 2024

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edited by Ian Berriman

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LISA FRANKENSTEIN

Romance is dead

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Highlights

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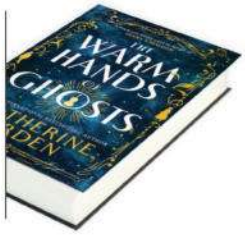
→ Noomi Rapace's astronaut comes back from the ISS to a world subtly altered. Or does she?

80 EVIL DEAD TRAP

→ We think *Saw*'s Jigsaw may have seen this wince-inducing Japanese horror.



86 THE WARM HANDS OF GHOSTS

→ Katherine Arden's fantasy takes us back to the Western Front.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

Spoiler: real people in the '80s didn't look like this.

LISA FRANKENSTEIN

Teenage Screams

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 1 MARCH

15 | 101 minutes

Director **Zelda Williams**

Cast **Kathryn Newton, Liza Soberano, Cole Sprouse, Carla Gugino**

Some things were just better in the '80s. Watching the 1989-set *Lisa Frankenstein*, you can't help but long for a time when hair was back-combed within an inch of its life, and whimsical dark comedies featuring gothy teenage girls, like *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Heathers*, were actually funny.

This horror "comedy" from acclaimed writer Diablo Cody (*Juno*, *Jennifer's Body*, *Young Adult*) and first-time director Zelda Williams centres on the titular Lisa (Kathryn Newton), an outcast still mourning the loss of her mother, who was murdered by an axe-wielding maniac two years prior. She spends her free time in an old cemetery for bachelors doing rubbings of tombstones, and is particularly taken by one for a young man called Frankenstein (Cole Sprouse).

Lisa's life isn't all bad; outside of her unconventional hobby, she has a sweet father and a loving stepsister, Taffy (the charming Liza Soberano), and a cute boy named Michael (Henry Eikenberry) keeps telling her how great her poetry is. She's not the most popular in her high school, but cheerleader Taffy makes every effort to include her and support her as she grieves.

The biggest obstacles she faces come in the form of wicked stepmother Janet, played with giant shoulder pads and scenery-chewing aplomb by Carla Gugino, and struggling to find a suitable candidate to lose her virginity to. One convenient bolt of lightning later, the long-dead dreamboat Frankenstein crawls out of his grave, and the two bond over being outcasts, murder the odd side character, and pick out cute outfits for one another.

While Diablo Cody's dialogue often brings the best out of young actors like Elliot Page in *Juno*, and uncovered the sharp comic talents of Megan Fox in *Jennifer's Body*, here her script tumbles out of the cast's mouths like old soil, and the gross-out visual gags are mostly just gross.

> **"The script tumbles out of the cast's mouths like old soil"**

The production design is where the film truly excels, with its sherbert-coloured Stepford-perfect suburbia, romantic graveyards crisply lit by moonlight, and gorgeous teenage fantasy sequences that are part Henry Selick, part Salvador Dali. Williams repeatedly distinguishes herself as a director with a rare and imaginative eye. But as every teenager learns, looks aren't everything, and no amount of style can compensate for so many of the jokes being as funny as a funeral.

There's so much potential here. It feels like the talents involved could have pulled off a grisly good time, but are unable to settle on a tone or land the punchlines. Come the conclusion it seems like there are some pieces missing, with the fundamental rules of the resurrection never clear and a central mystery going unsolved.

Lisa Frankenstein isn't an abject failure by any means, but works best as a reminder to dust off some blackly comic '80s classics and remember how good we used to have it. **Leila Latif**

i When Zelda Williams was a teenager she unsuccessfully auditioned for *Juno* (for the role of best friend Leah).

"This isn't really my bag." "Oh shut up."

BAGHEAD

Sack it off

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 95 minutes
Director **Alberto Corredor**
Cast **Freya Allan, Jeremy Irvine, Ruby Barker, Peter Mullan**

It may sound like an insult, possibly hurled at someone to imply they've spent too much time sniffing UHU, but here "Baghead" describes a supernatural entity. (It's a sack affair, not the type that'll set you back 10p.)

We're introduced to it early on, in a prologue which – by kicking off with a character talking to camera – recalls the way YouTube ads desperately try to hook you before you hit skip. This proves characteristic of the film's anxiety about audience attention span; an info-dumping session later on also occurs with indecent haste.

The Witcher's Freya Allan plays Iris, who after inheriting a rundown pub from her estranged father (Peter Mullan) soon discovers the secret in the basement: a woman who, once handed a dead person's belongings, can shapeshift into them, offering the bereaved a last audience with the deceased. Well, it's more original than a pool table. You or I would immediately run for the hills, but Iris – the sort of horror movie protagonist who doesn't pause before putting her name to an ancient parchment – is desperate for cash.

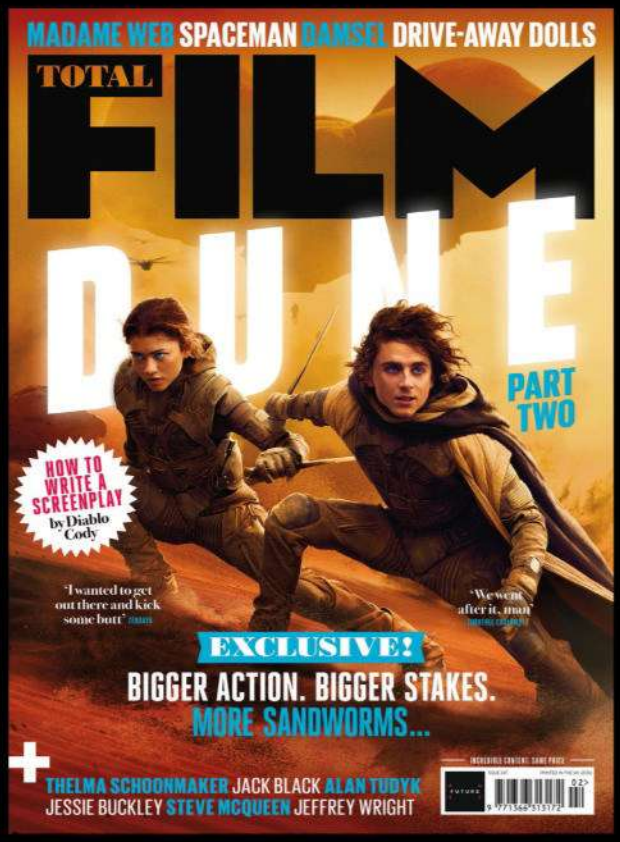
Expanded from a 15-minute short by the same director, this grief-themed horror has its strong points. During his brief screen time, Mullan brings a degree of gravelly conviction. The cavernous pub set is an effectively gloomy backdrop. And there's a surprising, expectations-defying twist.

Too much about the set-up feels arbitrary or unconvincing, though. Take the idea that encounters with Baghead always turn nasty after precisely two minutes. Given that kicker, why would people pay a fortune to speak to it? You're obviously not *really* communing with a loved one, and such a small window barely offers enough time to say, "You're dead. Now...". The film's makers no doubt see this as a bogeyman with the potential to return, but the concept seems fundamentally flawed. **Ian Berriman**

i We'll next see Freya Allan on-screen in *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes*, playing the main human character.

TOTAL FILM

ON SALE NOW


MADAME WEB SPACEMAN DAMSEL DRIVE-AWAY DOLLS
TOTAL FILM
DUNE
PART TWO
HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY by Diablo Cody
"I wanted to get out there and kick some butt"
"We went after it, man"
EXCLUSIVE!
BIGGER ACTION. BIGGER STAKES. MORE SANDWORMS...
THELMA SCHOONMAKER JACK BLACK ALAN TUDYK
JESSIE BUCKLEY STEVE MCQUEEN JEFFREY WRIGHT

DENIS VILLENEUVE AND HIS STELLAR CAST SPILL THE SPICE ON DUNE: PART TWO

"Look Mama, your favourite Hugo Simberg painting."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- We discover another thing that's different about the Earth Jo has returned to.
- Someone uses the word "liminal".

- We see Finnish artist Hugo Simberg's 1903 painting "The Wounded Angel".
- Alice gets comfortable inside a wardrobe.
- Somebody pops a red and yellow pill.
- Jonathan Banks is not wearing trousers.
- Fisher-Price get some free product placement for their tape recorder.

CONSTELLATION Season One

When Worlds Collide

★★★★☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, Wednesdays**

Creator **Peter Harness**

Cast **Noomi Rapace, James D'Arcy, Davina Coleman, Rosie Coleman, Jonathan Banks**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **This enigmatic** show is an original creation from writer Peter Harness, who previously adapted *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* and *The War Of The Worlds* – and revealed that the Moon is an egg in *Doctor Who*.

It's a series loath to spell out exactly what is going on, which makes it tricky to know where to draw the line re: spoilers. Still, you should get the gist after two or three episodes, and it seems fair to discuss three elements seeded early on: a child-friendly explanation of how quantum physics suggests that the same thing can exist in two states simultaneously; the CAL (Cold Atomic Lab), a piece of tech designed to "look for a new state of matter"; and an astronaut who returns home to find things subtly changed – wasn't the family car red, not blue?

A disaster-SF opening tasks Noomi Rapace's Jo with simply surviving, after an explosion on the International Space Station caused by a collision with... well, sheer impossibility. Once back on terra firma, however, the challenges facing her are more psychological. Does mental illness explain her acts of "misremembering", or is there (as someone puts it) "Something about space that is wrong"? It's a series tightly focused on family, and one which regularly calls on Rapace – an actor more usually associated with gutsy stoicism – to get teary-eyed.

Folding together flash-forwards and alternate realities, *Constellation* credits the audience with the intelligence to work things out for themselves. Once you have the basics figured out, it flags a little. Replaying events from different perspectives, the series is by its nature prone to repetition, and that commitment to the domestic angle can get a little frustrating. While Jo is naturally preoccupied with its effect on her relationship with daughter Alice (twins Davina and Rosie Coleman, soulfully wise beyond their years), what she's going through has potentially world-changing ramifications which you may find yourself itching to see explored – or at the very least *discussed*.

Clearly grounded in meticulous research (the ISS milieu feels completely authentic), it's a sober, grown-up series that exercises your grey matter, with cleverly crafted transitions that can leave you struggling to keep track of who's who and where's where.

While it maintains your interest throughout, it really sparks into life when jolting the viewer with a grotesque visual or giving *Breaking Bad* alumnus Jonathan Banks (in an intriguing dual role) the opportunity to add a dash of grizzled humour. There's clearly enormous scope to open things out in a second series; if it happens, more weirdness, more Banks and some zooming out to show the bigger picture are top of our wishlist. **Calvin Baxter**

i The series features a cruise ship called the SS Bernice – a sly nod to 1973 *Doctor Who* story "Carnival Of Monsters".

HAZBIN HOTEL Season One

A damned good time

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
Creator **Vivienne Medrano**
Cast **Erika Henningsen, Stephanie Beatriz, Alex Brightman, Keith David**

"Hey, you wanna see something *really* scary?"

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Like *Hazbin Hotel*'s** protagonist, Princess Charlie Morningstar (Erika Henningsen), this animated show is just so damn loveable. It's the creation of VivziePop, aka Vivienne Medrano, a YouTuber who set up a Patreon to fund the pilot on which this traditionally produced series is based.

Lucifer's sweet daughter is keen to make the best of Hell itself, and opens the titular hotel as a place for condemned souls who seek redemption. Despite being Hell's royalty (and only girlfriend Vaggie having any faith in her abilities), she believes that no one is beyond saving and seeks to keep hope alive.

> **"It's all very silly, packed with jokes about demons doing porn"**

This proves a challenging sell to a crowd surrounded by blazing infernos who are being intermittently terrorised by angels, led by the douchey Adam (yes, of Adam and Eve fame).

It's all very silly, packed with jokes about demons doing porn, gratuitous swearing, and Keith David singing about how it's okay that they're all a bunch of losers. At times, the show borders on chaos, with pacing so frantic that it can be challenging to absorb the dialogue and plot points before another musical number is launched. But Hell's inhabitants are revealed to have rich backstories, from addiction to abuse, even if most of their dialogue still consists of roasting Charlie and making jokes about bodily fluids.

A plethora of dick jokes aside, the show is more than just shock value, with vivid, crisp animation, moral ambiguity and tunes that legitimately slap. Episode six contains an unexpected reveal, but it's not until the finale that *Hazbin* really shows what it's capable of, bringing together giant musical numbers, spectacular violence and one hell of a plot twist.

The most hellish thing about watching this show is now having to wait for season two.

Leila Latif

Hazbin Hotel is the first animated television show from independent arthouse production company A24.

DOMINO DAY Series One

Promising Young Witches

★★★★☆

UK **BBC Three/iPlayer, streaming now**
Creator **Lauren Sequeira**
Cast **Siena Kelly, Alisha Bailey, Percelle Ascott, Poppy Lee Friar**

"I have to tell you... I'm a lamia." "Oh. I'm Aries."

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Dating's a** nightmare anyway, but add in apps, social media and the unquenchable thirst for human lifeforces and it is truly Hell on Earth. This is the unfortunate situation *Domino Day*'s eponymous protagonist finds herself in. As a witch with a vampiric edge, she not only has to endure dull small talk, but needs to feast upon her dates to sustain herself.

Domino has recently moved to Manchester and is navigating her way through the apps while working as a barista. Knowing that she has no choice but to make some people her victims, she decides it might as well be douchebags and, *Promising Young Woman* style, seeks out the worst men at her disposal to prey upon.

Things are thrown into disarray by the introduction of both dreamboat Leon (Percelle Ascott) and a chic plant-shop-running coven, who let Domino know she is a lamia whose powers may soon get the best of her if she doesn't learn to control them.

The show is best compared to fare from the other side of the Atlantic, having the gothic romance and social satire of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *The Vampire Diaries*. While *Domino*

> **"The show manages to pull off being sexy, scary and smart"**

doesn't quite have *Buffy*'s wit, there's a core intelligence that makes Domino a worthy successor to Sarah Michelle Gellar's hero. The budget doesn't quite extend to the production values of its American predecessors, of course, but Siena Kelly's performance has a prestige quality, possessing an emotional complexity and physical dexterity that makes the series feel top-tier.

The show manages to pull off being sexy, scary and smart while reinventing the lamia mythology for the modern age. As Domino's past catches up with her, her story is packed with electrifying twists. These six episodes feel like a solid foundation for a very promising future. **Leila Latif**

A man tells Domino he "normally isn't into black girls", which sadly actually happened to showrunner Lauren Sequeira.

PERCY JACKSON AND THE OLYMPIANS Season One

Myth-taken identities

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
- Showrunners **Jonathan E Steinberg, Dan Shotz**
- Cast **Walker Scobell, Leah Jeffries, Aryan Simhadri, Virginia Kull**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **When there's a** children's book series as popular as Rick Riordan's, you don't give up on it after two middling movies. The *Percy Jackson* franchise's two cinematic adaptations in 2010 and 2013 were fairly entertaining and did modest business, but they didn't break through into the popular culture consciousness in the same way as, say, the *Harry Potter* movie saga.

Which is clearly why Riordan has teamed up with Disney+ to develop this eight-part show – pleasing fans by staying as faithful to the original texts as possible (something the films weren't great at), and casting a much younger team as Percy and his teenage pals.

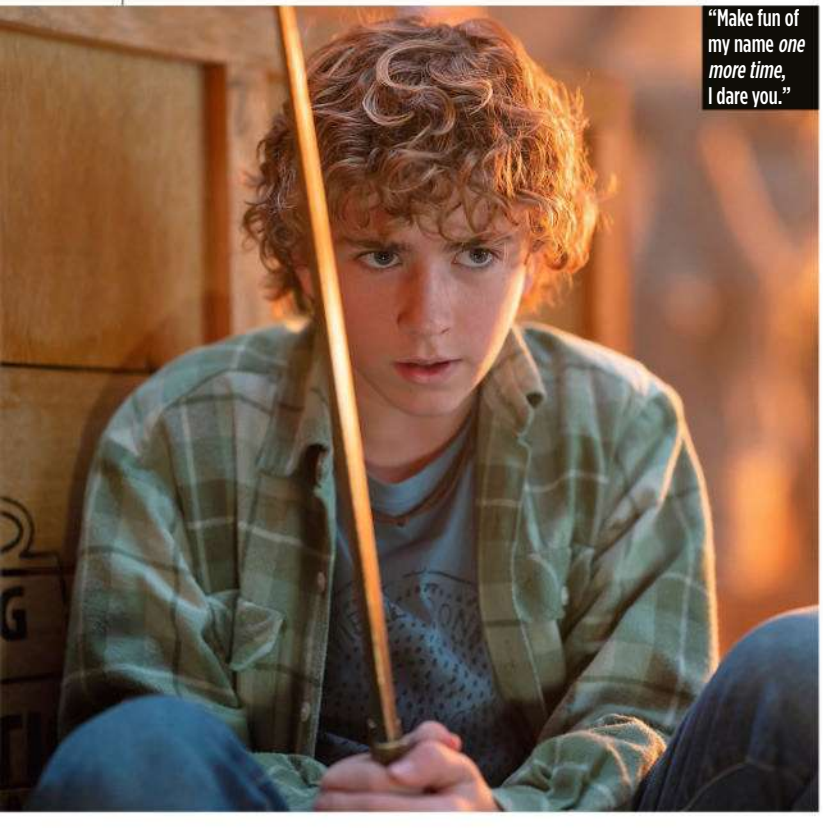
If you've been near one of Riordan's many Greek-myth-obsessed young readers since 2005, you'll know the plot. Percy Jackson (Walker Scobell) is the son of Poseidon (Toby Stephens) and a human mother (Virginia Kull, superb). He's had a tough childhood as a demigod who attracts the attention of all sorts of weird creatures. Finally learning the truth about his Olympian heritage, Percy and his best mate Grover (a puckish Aryan Simhadri) are packed off to a camp to learn godlike skillz.

Before you can say "chosen one", he's sent off on a quest to find Zeus's stolen lightning bolt, accompanied by the competent but disappointingly dull Annabeth (Leah Jeffries). Soon he's facing off with everyone from Medusa to Hades. Their adventures are delivered with a pleasingly high Disney budget and no end of casting treats (Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hermes could have been given more to do, mind).

Those unfamiliar with the books might frown at how quickly Percy comes to some of his realisations; there are moments where you can almost hear a penny drop, but you're not sure who dropped it for him. And smaller viewers might be alienated by lengthy dialogue scenes, though the frequent action does make up for exposition-dumping.

> **"It stays as faithful to the original texts as possible"**

The show has two MVPs: Ares, played by former WWE star Adam Copeland, having so much fun he's screaming out for a spin-off, and Scobell. While he occasionally deploys Joey's "smell the fart" acting style from *Friends*, he's also clearly a graduate of the Michael J Fox School of Charismatic Performing, delivering wisecracks like a master. *This* is the proper Percy. **Jayne Nelson**



"Make fun of my name *one more time*, I dare you."

Walker Scobell's stunt double, Cassandra Ebner, was so convincing that his dad once offered her his son's lunch.

MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE: REVOLUTION

★★★★☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Showrunner **Kevin Smith**
- Cast **Chris Wood, Mark Hamill, William Shatner, Melissa Benoist**

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 **While 2021's** *Masters Of The Universe: Revelation* might have disappointed fans by sidelining Prince Adam, *Revolution* will be more recognisable to dedicated He-Maniacs. Our hero has the power once again, taking centre stage in his own story, surrounded by some surprising and rewarding new (old) faces.

Bringing in Hordak from *She-Ra* as a new Big Bad, Gwildor from Cannon's *Masters Of The Universe* movie as additional comic relief, and obscure cool characters like Rio Blast (who didn't appear in the original cartoon), Kevin Smith digs deep into his toy box to populate *Revolution* with a wide range of fan favourites.

Which isn't to say he is simply smashing together action figures; an early subplot involving He-Man's dad King Randor's unexplained sickness brings emotional depth to proceedings, and there's sincere feeling in how it plays out. There's also time for some well-earned romance, for all those who used to smush Teela and He-Man's faces together. Not us, obviously.

Featuring excellent action, cheesy (but still funny) one-liners, fantastic additions to the cast (Shatner! Supergirl! Q!) and some truly unpredictable reveals, *Revolution* is a delight from start to finish. **Sam Ashurst**

ECHO

Going native

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Marion Dayre**

Cast **Alaqua Cox, Vincent D'Onofrio, Devery Jacobs, Graham Greene**

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 **After a 2023 it** might want to forget, it seems like team Marvel started off the new year on the wrong foot, with perceptions that it effectively dumped this *Hawkeye* spin-off onto screens with little in the way of fanfare, following talk of creative issues.

Warning signs included the different release pattern – with the series being dumped all in one batch, rather than weekly; a new banner of "Marvel Spotlight", ostensibly to indicate that you don't need to have watched a swathe of other movies and series to follow along; and the depths-of-winter January release date.

As it turns out, the show itself is better than rumours might have suggested, but still not at the level of, say, *WandaVision* or *Loki*. Coming off like a cross between the Netflix Marvel shows (with a more violent, and – try not to sigh at the word – "grittier" feel) and the MCU's more usual output, it still finds itself caught between two worlds.

On the plus side, lead Alaqua Cox continues to be a compelling performer as the deaf Native American assassin, expressing emotion through sign language and giving some welcome depth to the character.

> **"The show is better than rumours might have suggested"**

Come on mate, put a helmet on. It's not clever.

The fight scenes are largely effective, particularly one set at a roller rink. And the layering-in of Choctaw history and spirituality is handled well, indigenous talent both behind and in front of the camera proving to be a boon. It also provides a new power set for the title character, even if it is a little obscure.

When the series expands its scope, though, it suffers – an otherwise fun scene with Echo breaking into a train is hamstrung by dodgy effects, and even with Vincent D'Onofrio on form, the Kingpin stuff gets repetitive. So while *Echo* is not entirely without merit, it seems unlikely to spawn another series.

James White

ℹ Devery Jacobs (Maya's cousin Bonnie) also voices Mohawk hero Kahhori in season two of animated series *What If...?*

EVIL DEAD TRAP

Slayed in Japan

RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY
1988/1992 | 18 | Blu-ray
Directors **Toshiharu Ikeda, Izô Hashimoto**
Cast **Miyuki Ono, Aya Katsuragi, Shoko Nakajima, Rie Kondoh**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Don't be misled:** neither of these Japanese horrors are *Evil Dead* movies – though you may discern a possible influence.

Evil Dead Trap ★★★★☆ sees TV host Nami (Miyuki Ono) taking her crew to a disused military base after being sent a snuff tape. Calling the cops would make more sense, but then we'd have missed some inventive kills.

Various Western horror tropes are stirred together in the pot. The "split up and die" set-up is pure slasher. A woods scene has a whiff of Sam Raimi. Ocular trauma and swarming maggots recall Lucio Fulci; scenes bathed in blue light Dario Argento. Mind you, director Toshiharu Ikeda swore blind that, having zero interest in the genre, he'd never seen any Italian horror.

One set-piece sticks in your brain like a razor blade, echoing Poe and anticipating *Saw*. Nami tries to open a door, unaware this will fire a crossbow at a bound-and-gagged friend. Just as you relax, a tripwire activates a swinging blade... A surprisingly stylish film, it grows increasingly unhinged as it progresses. The best way to approach it is as a strange nightmare, or a piece of blood-drenched surrealism.

More of a psychological thriller, **Evil Dead Trap II: Hideki** ★★★☆☆ feels almost entirely unconnected. It centres on Aki, a dumpy projectionist haunted by a creepy ghost child – the sort of figure later familiar to Western audiences via the *Ju-On* films. She's also a serial killer, behind a string of murders of young women found with their ovaries cut out.

It's a head-scratching tale, whose many elements – including a second killer, and a salesman who's hot for Aki – are nigh-on impossible to tie together. Is the ghost boy forcing her to kill? Is he her own aborted child? We could pile on the questions. The first film is bracingly bewildering; *Hideki* is frustratingly muddy.

That said, it boasts some striking cinematography: bloody murder enacted in a raging downpour; figures silhouetted against neon signs; a slow-mo knife-fight amidst flapping sheets.

Extras Both films have pretty similar bonuses ★★★½☆, including chatty commentaries teaming critics Jasper Sharp and David Flint. It can be frustrating that they haven't done more sleuthing, but they do provide useful cultural context – like noting that the films showing at Aki's cinema are Korean, which would pass most viewers by.

Each film comes with an interview. Toshiharu Ikeda cuts a dispirited figure in a 2004 chat (32 minutes), supping beer and gloomily suggesting that he's lost his mojo. Meanwhile, Chiaki Konaka (22 minutes), co-writer of *II*, says the director encouraged him not to "put things together in a logical way". So he's to blame... *EDT* adds storyboards; *Hideki* a video essay (12 minutes). Plus: galleries; booklets. **Ian Berriman**

Waiting times at A&E have got ridiculous now.

> "It grows increasingly unhinged as it progresses"

ⓘ Sadly, Toshiharu Ikeda's body was found in the sea in December 2010. It's thought that he jumped from a nearby cliff.

KUNG FU CULT MASTER

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1993 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Wong Jing**
Cast **Jet Li, Sharla Cheung, Chingmy Yau, Gigi Lai**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If, like many** raised in Hong Kong, you know Jin Yong's Condor Trilogy – a series of wuxia books set during the Yuan dynasty – you'll get something out of this martial arts epic. If not... good luck.

Indeed, as it's based on trilogy-closer *The Heaven Sword And Dragon Saber*, you may struggle to survive the opening narration, which in summarising "the story so far" feels like a CliffsNotes for the history of the Universe.

The film proper is almost as dense. Every other line seems to crowbar in a name, an artefact and a fighting style. After half an hour of "Golden Haired Lion King, Heaven Reliant Sword, Nine Yang Divine Stance", all you can hear is Peppermint Patty's teacher.

Still, you can always hit mute and enjoy Sammo Hung's fight choreography. There are a few amusingly outré details, like a blood-drinking "Bat King" who swoops about. And some earthy humour provides the odd guffaw – you don't expect a bushy-eyebrowed master to call someone "a fucking nutjob".

Extras Switching from Cantonese to an English dub doesn't help – it sounds like everyone's talking through their hand. Detailing variances from the novel, Frank Djeng's expert commentary is also hard going. A 2004 Sammo Hung interview (24 minutes) is pretty dull. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

PEEPING TOM

SFX Loves

Looking for trouble

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1960 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/regular)/DVD

Director **Michael Powell**

Cast **Carl Boehm, Moira Shearer, Anna Massey, Maxine Audley**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This Freudian** horror thriller practically ended Michael Powell's career. While by modern standards it seems pretty tame, you can understand why. Critics were not ready for its portrait of a compulsive voyeur, set amid a seedy Soho milieu of glamour photography – all peeling wallpaper and bruised-skinned models – least of all from the director of films like *The Red Shoes* and *A Matter Of Life And Death*.

Austrian Carl Boehm seems strange casting as the decidedly English Mark, driven to film the women he kills with a blade hidden in a camera leg. He excels in the role though, providing flashes of menace but also attracting our sympathy. A psychologist father who treated him like a lab rat is framed as the source of Mark's hang-ups, and as the painfully shy focus-puller develops a friendship with an innocent neighbour, you can almost convince yourself of the possibility of redemption.

While deploying a killer's POV that would later be baked into the slasher template, and boasting some tense sequences, it's a thoughtful portrait of fetishism – one that implicates the viewer. It also has a rich vein of sly wit. "You don't get that in *Sight And Sound*!" a co-worker says, showing off a pin-up. And note the name on a hack director's chair: Arthur Baden (a nod, via Scouts founder Baden-Powell, to Powell himself).

Extras Sir Christopher Frayling provides an articulate overview, (28 minutes), highlighting less obvious aspects like the film's satire of the Rank Organisation. Also new: a chat between critics Rhianna Dhillon and Anna Bogutskaya (37 minutes), and a restoration featurette (15 minutes).

A 2005 retrospective (19 minutes) has contributions from Martin Scorsese (a fan), Powell's widow Thelma Schoonmaker, and Boehm. A 10-minute Schoonmaker interview provides Powell's perspective. Ian Christie's critical commentary is perceptive and smoothly delivered. Plus: intro; trailers; galley; booklet.

Ian Berriman

ℹ Pamela Green (one of Mark's victims) was a real-life glamour model, who appeared in nudist film *Naked As Nature Intended*.

BADLAND HUNTERS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 18 | SVOD

NETFLIX **If you're in the mood** for a designer-violence Korean post-apocalyptic movie with minimal plot but tons of inventive fight scenes and black humour, *Badland Hunters* delivers in some style.

Low-budget and unapologetically lowbrow, it's surprisingly slick, as a pair of warriors of the wasteland take on the mutated forces of a gloriously odious evil scientist. It ain't *Citizen Kane*, but then, *Kane* didn't have a crocodile decapitation scene. **Dave Golder**

COLD MEAT

★★★★☆

RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY

2024 | 15 | Download

Sébastien Drouin makes the most of his micro-budget with this chilling chamberpiece set almost entirely inside a snow-trapped car in the Colorado Rockies.

Nina Bergman is the kidnapped waitress and Allen Leech her murderous captor in this inventive and smartly written riff on the serial killer genre. Featuring some deftly delivered plot twists, imaginative visual flourishes and a light dusting of the supernatural, it's an assured debut by a director who's one to watch. **Steve O'Brien**

THE SEEDING

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Download

Music video director Barnaby Clay's debut feature opens with a shot of a toddler's face as it munches down a human finger. An arresting first scene, but little else in this Utah-set horror manages to match it for sheer queasiness.

Scott Haze plays a hiker who finds himself trapped in the desert and tormented by a gang of sadistic, feral children, all of whom seem to be variations on *Deliverance*'s banjo kid. A megamix of other, better hillbilly horrors, this film unfortunately adds little new to the genre. **Steve O'Brien**

TROPIC

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 4 MARCH

2022 | 15 | Download

This sombre French indie finds twin brothers competing for a place on a mission to the stars – but an encounter with a parasitic alien organism leaves one of them disfigured and mentally wounded, cheated of his chance.

Anchored by Earthly reality more than the interstellar, this study of trauma and corrosive male jealousy favours psychological complexity over genre trappings; when it edges into straight monster flick territory, it feels just a little cheap. A tough, ultimately rewarding watch. **Nick Setchfield**

ORION AND THE DARK

Fright Night

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | PG | SVOD

Director **Sean Charmatz**

Cast **Jacob Tremblay, Colin Hanks, Paul Walter Hauser, Angela Bassett**

NETFLIX **Sean Charmatz's** animation starts as you would expect: a straightforward retelling of Emma Yarlett's adorable children's book about a young boy named Orion (Jacob Tremblay) who's afraid of mostly everything, but more than anything else of the dark.

When dusk comes, Orion nervously hides beneath the covers, hoping the shadows won't get him. But they do. The literal embodiment of Dark (Paul Walter Hauser) appears before him and whisks him off on an overnight adventure to learn that the world's not that scary.

So far, so normal, but this wouldn't be much of a film if it stuck to the 40 pages of source material. Writer Charlie Kaufman's idiosyncratic fingerprints are everywhere as Orion's travels become weirder and more imaginative, with the man behind *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* and *Being John Malkovich* adding a meta-narrative for good measure.

As the eponymous duo meet other nighttime entities, voiced by the likes of Angela Bassett and Natasia Demetriou, it's a joyous ride. With its consistent humour, a heartwarming message about not giving in to your anxieties, and a fluid animation style influenced by DreamWorks' recent features, this is not to be missed. **Jack Shepherd**

ℹ Producer Peter McCown studied Charlie Kaufman's work at film school, analysing Eternal Sunshine in a screenwriting class.

MONOLITH

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY

2023 | 15 | Download

A disgraced journalist turns to paranormal podcasting, only to uncover the most unfathomable of phenomena: a conspiracy involving mysterious black bricks, seemingly of alien origin and possessed of uncanny power.

The title nods to the iconic artefact in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and this Australian indie shares some of Kubrick's inscrutability. But while it sustains an unsettling tone, the storytelling feels wilfully oblique. A psychological study that may have worked best as a podcast itself. **Nick Setchfield**

DELIVER US

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | Download

When a nun claims to be bearing twins from immaculate conception, a young priest is assigned to investigate. An ancient prophecy appears close to fulfilment: the birth of the Messiah and the Antichrist in a two-for-one deal.

Essentially *The Omen* with goth trimmings, this apocalyptic horror is artfully shot but ends up a meandering, portentous slog, all gloomy interiors and whispered lore. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* fans may appreciate the sight of Alexander Siddig as a cardinal, though. **Nick Setchfield**

HISTORY OF EVIL

★★★½☆

RELEASED 23 FEBRUARY

2024 | TBC | SVOD

SHUDDER **There's a lot going** on in this dystopian horror – arguably too much. Set in a future USA that's become a hardline Christian theocracy, it follows activists Alegre and Ron (*Strange New Worlds*' Paul Wesley) as they go on the run... and hole up in a haunted house.

Director Bo Mirhosseni tries to weave these elements together into a thematic whole, but it never entirely coheres. Still, there are some genuinely tense moments here, and some efficient world-building. An admirable attempt to do something new. **Will Salmon**

SLOTHERHOUSE

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 15 | Download

Yes, the makers think it's a silly title too. But what else are you gonna call a slasher about a killer sloth?

Wannabe Sigma Lambda Theta president Emily sets the massacre in motion when she brings the seemingly harmless cutie into her sorority house as a new mascot. Unfortunately, "Alpha" sees Emily posing with a poacher on her Instagram. Then it's open season. None of it's remotely plausible, but the sloth puppet is adorable and there's even a serious point, which is more than you can say for *Sharknado*. **Sarah Dobbs**

BLACK TIGHT KILLERS

Beat Me Up Before You Go-go

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY

1966 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Yasuharu Hasebe**

Cast **Akira Kobayashi, Chieko Matsubara, Mieko Nishio, Kozue Kamo**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Whether Bond** belongs in *SFX* is a 29-year debate. Arguably not if the most far-out element is testicle abuse, but then you've got to factor in the invisible cars and space lasers too.

Neither feature in this Japanese riff on 007, but it's detached from reality alright, featuring a team of female ninjas/go-go dancers whose methods include driving exploding golf balls, tossing 7" singles like throwing stars, the "ninja chewing gum bullet", and "the octopus pot", a technique we can't possibly describe in a family magazine.

These knife-wielding vixens initially seem like the villains, but as our hero looks for a kidnapped air hostess, we find that they're the more entitled of two factions competing to locate a stash of gold squirreled away after WW2. That's a spoiler, but the plot is of little interest, just something on which to hang shoot-outs and punch-ups (and gratuitous bondage).

The deliriously groovy aesthetic is the hook. The film spits in the face of realism: driving scenes feature tinted back-projection which brazenly switches between different primary colours, creating a comic book feel, while the set design suspends ersatz neon signs against inky black, conjuring a non-specific international *someplace*.

Meanwhile, the soundtrack bustles with bebop jazz and twangy guitar. You just *know* Tarantino owns a print. "A magnificent accomplishment!" screams the trailer. If they'd come up with a half-decent story too, that would be an understatement.

She's clearly been sent to assassinate Prince.

Extras Japanese cinema expert Jasper Sharp's bio-heavy commentary is keen on drawing connections to films by *Branded To Kill*'s Seijun Suzuki (for whom director Yasuharu Hasebe worked as an AD). A 2000 interview with the latter (nine minutes) is so self-effacing he almost vanishes. A comment on the studio's reaction to the movie amuses: "I didn't work again for 18 months!" Plus: trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i The clearest Bond homage comes in the form of two dancers painted gold, and talk of how this could cause them to suffocate.

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"Here, do you know someone called Tony?"

THE TIGER'S APPRENTICE

Roar Power

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | PG | SVOD

Director **Raman Hui**

Cast **Brandon Soo Hoo, Michelle Yeoh, Henry Golding, Lucy Liu**

PARAMOUNT+ **At a slim 99 minutes** (and a good chunk of those are taken up with the end credits), *The Tiger's Apprentice* is a colourful blast of noise, chaos and fun cartoon critters. If you want more – original storytelling, unexpected plot twists, kids who don't say "Whoa!" all the bleedin' time – you're out of luck.

The animals of the Chinese zodiac take centre stage here, rallying around teenager Tom (Brandon Soo Hoo), new guardian of a magical pendant that could destroy the world if it falls into the wrong hands. Those hands belong to Michelle Yeoh's wicked Loo, who chases Tom all over San Francisco while he learns how to be a guardian from Mr Hu (Henry Golding), the zodiac tiger.

There are dragons, martial arts and a goat who blows things up, but the film's animation strains too hard – and ultimately fails – to bring *Spider-Verse*-level innovation on a miniscule budget. Worst of all, however, is the *unforgivable* cover of Survivor's "Eye Of The Tiger" that plays at the end. **Jayne Nelson**

i According to songwriter Frankie Sullivan, "Eye Of The Tiger" is about "getting your ass out of bed" on a Monday.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

SFX Loves

Against all the pods

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1978 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)

Director **Philip Kaufman**

Cast **Donald Sutherland, Brooke Adams, Veronica Cartwright, Jeff Goldblum**

It's vanishingly rare for a remake of a classic to match the original, but you can file Philip Kaufman's take on Don Siegel's 1956 original alongside *The Thing*.

It relocates Jack Finney's paranoid tale of identity-stealing "pods" from a small town milieu to San Francisco, bringing a sense of scale but remaining fundamentally faithful. It's brilliantly cast, Donald Sutherland, Brooke Adams and Jeff Goldblum bringing a quirky individuality to their characters which emphasises what's under threat. Handheld camera places you in the urban crowd, while images of distortion – a spyhole view, funhouse mirrors, noir shadows, a cracked windscreen – create a heightened, off-kilter vibe.

Physical effects showing the pods disgorging their contents – a gooey meld of flowering and childbirth – are memorably icky. Fresh from his work on *Star Wars*, Ben Burtt matches them with his sound design, a symphony of heartbeat pulses and raspy breath, while jazz pianist Denny Zeitlin's score brilliantly combines synths, strings and discordant percussion. A triumph in every respect.

> **Handheld camera places you in the urban crowd**

"Don't look now, but this doesn't feel right."

Extras Eleven years on from the old Arrow Video Blu-ray, you'd expect new on-disc bonuses for this UHD debut, but no. Hey ho.

It's a decent selection, mind. Kaufman's old commentary is very informative. Kim Newman lets Ben Wheatley and Norman J Warren get the odd word in during a group discussion (52 minutes). Film historian Annette Insdorf has perceptive observations (17 minutes), and a talking head on Finney (11 minutes) is instructive.

These featurettes hail from 2013; four more (39 minutes, all decent) date from 2007; Kaufman, Sutherland and the writer all contribute. Plus: trailer; booklet; poster; six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i The sound of a busker's banjo was recorded by Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia – he was a friend of one of the sound effects team.

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RIVER

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Junta Yamaguchi**

Cast **Riko Fujitani, Manami Honjô, Gôta Ishida, Yoshimasa Kondô**

Director Junta Yamaguchi follows *Beyond The Infinite Two Minutes* with another movie obsessed with that exact slice of time. But while his 2020 debut dealt in meticulous temporal logic, *River* proves a sweeter, more emotional tale.

In a riverside inn in wintry Kyoto, guests and staff experience a seemingly endless succession of time loops, rewinding their lives in two-minute chunks while their memories remain intact.

For some it's an existential nightmare of neverending bowls of rice, while for others it's a blessing: a despairing novelist relishes the chance to kiss goodbye to a deadline. The characters grasp their situation absurdly quickly, but that's the gag. For the inn's workers, it's just another domestic inconvenience to be solved.

Assembled from continuous two-minute takes, the film manages to stay fresh and nimble even as you fear for your sanity as yet another *Groundhog* replay kicks in. The cast sell the whimsy with bags of charm, and it all builds to a hugely entertaining four-dimensional farce.

Extras A substantial Making Of (63 minutes) provides a fly-on-the-wall account, capturing the experience of shooting in some challenging weather conditions. An interview with Yamaguchi (18 minutes) provides good insights from the director's perspective. Plus: trailer. **Nick Setchfield**

DARIO ARGENTO PANICO

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Simone Scafidi**

SHUDDER **This documentary on** the Italian horror director has a selling point that rather falls flat. It follows Argento to a hotel where, we're told, he's completing work on a script. But this set-up seems contrived, and affords no insights into his creative process.

No matter. The celebration which follows, with talking heads chronologically organised, has plenty to recommend it. The interviewee list is impressive, encompassing numerous collaborators, family members, and (surprisingly) Argento's first wife.

Fellow filmmakers like Guillermo del Toro, Nicolas Winding Refn and Gaspar Noé pop up to lay tributes at the maestro's feet, while the archives are raided for interesting clips from old newsreels and TV interviews.

The man himself doesn't give much away – an anecdote about feeling suicidal while making *Suspiria* is well-worn. It's Asia, star of three of her father's '90s films, who comes closest to revelatory insights, broaching the awkwardness of having Dad direct you in a sex scene, and recalling him crying during a trip to see the Pope. A moment where elder daughter Fiore praises Argento's parenting is sweet – he actually cracks what might be a bashful smile. Aw.

Argentophiles sufficiently dedicated to have devoured his autobiography won't learn that much, but for less hardcore fans it's a good overview. **Ian Berriman**

AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN PARIS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 26 FEBRUARY

1997 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Anthony Waller**

Cast **Julie Delpy, Tom Everett Scott, Vince Vieluf, Phil Buckman**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In spite of the** bold on-screen claim that it's "based on characters created by John Landis", there's scant connective tissue between this tardy sequel and its beloved 1981 predecessor.

Relocating from London to the French capital – presented with choral chants and rain-lashed gargoyles – the film soon locks into breezy teen comedy mode as three American jocks arrive on a European bender.

The marginally more sensitive of the bros is smitten by an ethereal Julie Delpy, there to provide a touch of culture-clash romance – and an unexpected link to a lycanthropic scourge that's menacing the city...

It's a pacy, amiable enough watch, but there's none of the offbeat wit of the John Landis original. The humour leans into the broad, dumb and obnoxious, complete with inflated condoms, though a sight-gag of a zombie girl popping an eyeball after attempting to whistle raises a smirk, at least.

More crucially, the werewolf scenes undo the movie. There was a sense of awe to Rick Baker's transformation scene in 1981. Here the beasts are conjured into life by primitive CG, and these crude effects feel of their moment in the worst way. **Nick Setchfield**

ROUND UP

The biggest thing to hit shiny disc this month is **THE MARVELS** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now) – also now on Disney+. When Carol Danvers, Monica Rambeau and Kamala Khan's light-based powers get entangled, they must work together to foil Kree ruler Dar-Benn. We said: "A remarkably sprightly instalment with winning performances and memorable set-pieces." Bonuses: director/VFX supervisor commentary; Making Of (11 minutes); behind-the-scenes footage (five minutes); four deleted scenes; gag reel. Timothée Chalamet shows us his Willy in prequel **WONKA** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 4 March), which sees the young chocolatier colliding with shadowy businessmen as he looks for a shop to sell his wares. We said: "The whimsical worldbuilding is exquisite." Extras: five featurettes (45 minutes) on the director's "vision", music, sets, costumes and the chocolates. Prequel **THE HUNGER GAMES: THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 26 February) shows President Snow as a young man, mentoring a tribute at the 10th Hunger Games. We said: "The action scenes are thrilling... What lets it down is the bloated run time." Best bonuses: an eight-part Making Of and director's commentary. Don't be put off by the title of **FREAKS VS THE REICH** (Blu-ray/DVD, 26 February); this Italian fantasy about circus performers with uncanny abilities, hunted by a Nazi officer, is more Guillermo del Toro than *Snakes On A Plane*. We said: "A true tonic for superhero fatigue." No bonuses here.

THE WARM HANDS OF GHOSTS

Fiddling while Ypres burns

★★★★½

RELEASED 7 MARCH

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Katherine Arden**

Publisher **Century**

The First World War was barely underway when "The Bowmen", Arthur Machen's short story about ghostly Agincourt archers protecting British soldiers in Belgium, was published.

The tale was inspired by rumours of angelic intervention during the retreat from Mons the month before; so fully did his version take root in popular imagination that Machen apparently later had to remind readers his tale was fantasy. Intense, brutal and precarious as it was, life in the trenches of WWI was permeated with superstitions; for those anxiously awaiting news back home, too, magical thinking had an appeal.

It's this marginal, reality-bending territory that Katherine Arden builds upon, to considerable atmospheric effect. She focuses on a Nova Scotia family which, although 3,000 miles from the main theatre of conflict, has been scarred both physically and emotionally by it.

As the novel opens, Laura is devastated by the news that her brother Freddie – one of 650,000 Canadians to fight in the war – has been declared missing on the Western Front. Having recently lost both parents to an explosive collision between two ships in Halifax harbour (a real event which flattened everything within a half-mile radius), there's little to keep her on that side of the Atlantic.

So she takes up an offer to return to her role as a frontline nurse, hoping to find Freddie, or find out what happened to him.

Laura is an appealingly clear-eyed, capable protagonist, with a wry sense of humour – tempered but undimmed by the horrors she's witnessed in three years of wartime nursing – and a brisk compassion for her charges, if not always for herself.

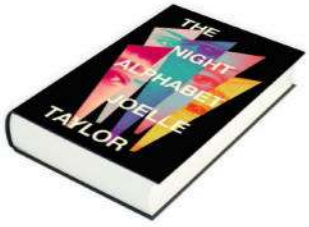
She carries her own war wounds, in the shape of deeply scarred hands and a painful limp, a legacy of the shelling of her casualty clearing station. Like so many of the brave, struggling characters we meet – steely hospital manager Mary, bereaved mother Pim – she holds back despair by throwing herself into the war effort and indulging just the tiniest spark of hope: what if Freddie still lives?

In flashback, we follow Freddie through the aftermath of a battlefield explosion, which he only survives by forming a reluctant bond with a German soldier, Winter. Having dragged themselves out of an overturned pillbox and waded through flooded shell craters, the pair face a nightmarish landscape of ruins and corpses, with two options: return and be shot as deserters, or step into the clutches of a sinister fiddle-player whose enchanted sanctuary is paid for in memories.

This isn't a super-cheery read, but it's full of humanity even amid the grimness. Freddie's connection with Winter is moving without ever dipping into sentimental tweeness, and Laura's story makes space for some complicated, meaningful threads: moments of comfort shared with soldiers in extremis, and the difficult way that this suffering goes hand-in-hand with a freedom and recognition that young women rarely got to experience in peacetime.

Arden wears her research lightly, but effectively; life on the front lines is drawn with gritty pungency, and the Canadian dimension brings an unfamiliar angle to otherwise well-trodden ground. The result is a fantasy novel compelling both in its own right, and as a metaphor for the way this conflict marked the death of so many certainties. **Nic Clarke**

i The book's title was inspired by *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*, a memoir by Canadian First World War soldier Will R Bird.



THE NIGHT ALPHABET

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Joelle Taylor**

Publisher **Riverrun**

Genre writing tends to prioritise plot and ideas over language. As readers, the first question we ask about a book is generally "What's it about?", not "What does it sound like?" In poet and playwright Joelle Taylor's debut novel, both dimensions are in play.

On the one hand, this is an intense look at gender and violence. Narrator Jones has spent her life "falling into" the lives of others, like a Lancastrian *Quantum Leap*-er. Fetching up in a tattoo parlour in 23rd century Hackney, she uses the patchwork of ink on her own skin to retell her experiences, from "canary" child working in a 19th century coal mine to vigilante sex worker to technician in a future womb factory.

On the other hand, this is a book that that begs to be read aloud, one that delights in the rhythms of language and whose imagery brings life to the most mundane detail ("It is a late autumn afternoon, and the sky outside has bruised cheeks" feels *very* November).

This energy carries us through the more gruelling episodes (sexual violence features), as does the focus on transformation and liberation rather than exploitation. While its strength is arguably as a cluster of linked short stories, it's a book that's more than the sum of its parts.

Nic Clarke

HIGH VAULTAGE

★★★½☆

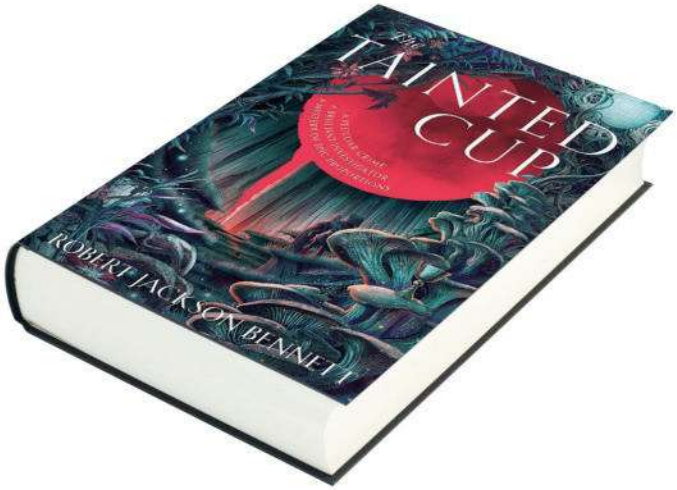
RELEASED 14 MARCH
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Authors **Chris Sugden, Jen Sugden**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Considering the huge success of Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams, comic SFF novels remain surprisingly few and far between. Then again, such books aren't easy to get right – as, in taking too long to introduce us to private investigators Archibald Fleet and Clara Entwhistle, the early pages here illustrate.

Stick with *High Vaultage* though, because once the plot kicks in, as the duo work a corruption case linked to a series of seemingly impossible bank robberies, there's much fun to be had – for all that a few more laugh-out-loud moments would be welcome.

Set in the same world as the authors' successful podcast *Victoriocity*, it takes place in 1887, against a backdrop of the sprawling mega-metropolis of Even Greater London. It's a city that has grown to cover southern England, in part thanks to the endlessly busy efforts of an engineer army inspired by the visionary genius of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Residents of the capital include, of course, Queen Victoria, a part-machine, part-human survivor of multiple assassination attempts – a conceit that gives a flavour of the overall tone.

But Victoria is, for now at least, a sideshow. It's Fleet and Entwhistle, respectively mildly down at heel and fiercely posh, who command the attention. More soon from this odd couple, please. **Jonathan Wright**



THE TAINTED CUP

The cup of mystery overfloweth

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!
432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Robert Jackson Bennett**
Publisher **Hodderscape**

Since making his debut with the Stephen King-esque *Mr Shivers* in 2010, Robert Jackson Bennett has demonstrated his fluency in horror, fantasy and science fiction. With *The Tainted Cup*, he combines epic fantasy with a murder mystery.

His protagonist is Dinios Kol, freshly appointed assistant investigator to the brilliant if highly eccentric Ana Dolabra. An "Engraver" with perfect recall, Kol serves as the eyes and ears for the blind and reclusive Dolabra. His first case is the unsettling murder of an Imperial official, killed when a tree suddenly and fatally sprouts from his torso.

The relationship between the two detectives fits the classic blueprint of the oddball genius and their strait-laced assistant, but Bennett compensates for the familiarity of this dynamic by slowly revealing hidden depths to Kol, and with the sheer strength of his prose. The plot is constantly intriguing and the dialogue brisk and lively.

The author conjures vivid landscapes for his characters to explore, crafting atmosphere in the description of an abandoned fort with "many tottering towers and structures leaning about like a jaw full of broken teeth".

The world-building is richly detailed, with a deep sense of history underpinning the Empire of Khanum in which Kol serves. There are different races living under the Empire's banner, a landowning aristocracy, and a cleverly imagined form of science. Happily, the story wears its mythopoesis lightly though, never becoming weighed down by exposition dumps.

Bennett adds to the suspense surrounding Kol and Dolabra's case by building in an existential threat to the Empire itself. It's protected from the menace of massive Leviathans by a series of colossal walls. As the investigation reaches its climax, a Leviathan approaches a breach in the defences, making the case a race against time. Meticulously constructed, with clues cunningly scattered throughout, *The Tainted Cup* is full to the brim. **David West**

i Bennett found inspiration for Ana Dolabra in Nero Wolfe, the '30s armchair detective created by Rex Stout.

THE BOOK OF LOVE

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
624 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Kelly Link**
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

Don't be put off by the title: the kind of love Kelly Link writes about here isn't just romantic. It's much, much weirder than that.

Several months after mysteriously disappearing, three teenagers – ambitious Laura, loyal Daniel and secretive Mo – find their way home to the small seaside town of Lovesend. They can't remember where they've been, but they know it was dark and cold and scary; a place beyond death, ruled over by a pair of creepy guardians who serve a capricious goddess. And unless they want to be banished back there, they'll have to learn to do magic, sharpish.

Love, here, is a kind of magic. Love for parents, children, friends and siblings; love for romantic partners, for power, for music, for sex, for freedom, for life itself. Not all of it is healthy; much of it is frightening. But also, *magic* is magic here, as line-cooks morph into tigers and bronze statues parade down the high street. Readers of Link's acclaimed short stories will recognise the distinct flavour of her prose, the way she balances whimsy with real emotion; her writing itself might be a kind of ritual magic designed to draw you irresistibly in.

Think *The Master And Margarita*, or maybe a latter season of *Riverdale*: everything is strange, anything is possible. Is it too obvious to say you'll love this book?

Sarah Dobbs

STAR TREK: PICARD THE ART AND MAKING OF THE SERIES

Making it so

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY

207 pages | Hardback

Author **Joe Fordham**

Publisher **Titan Books**

Ten months on from the Enterprise-D crew's victory over a Borg-ified fleet, this coffee table book feels a tad belated. Still, it's an accessible, well-organised affair, which quizzes all the key creatives – not just production designers Todd Cherniawsky and Dave Blass, but producers, directors, effects boffins and more.

Tracing the project from a proposed *Short Treks* titled "Mysterious Entanglements", it reveals paths not taken: an early pitch imagined Picard working with a theatre troupe, while ideas regarding Jean-Luc's son included old flame Vash being his mother. Other trivia nuggets include the fact that Blass conceived the Borg Singularity by imagining that they'd assimilated the planet-killer from "The Doomsday Machine".

The imagery's the main draw. An array of concept designs and behind-the-scenes snaps include some real treats: Stargazer schematics and a stunning "Jurati Borg" concept are two of our faves. It's always fascinating to see a range of options too – be it a dozen riffs on the Ryton Nebula "space baby", or six Worf hairstyles.

The section which impresses the most details art director Liz Kloczkowski's obsessive quest to craft a "museum quality replica" of the Enterprise-D bridge, which included spending $1,000 on samples to source the right red carpet, and *matching a wood knot* on Worf's station. You can understand why Marina Sirtis was moved to tears... **Ian Berriman**

i Artifacts in Picard's library include a ship-in-a-bottle Promellian battle cruiser, a nod to a line in *TNG*'s "Booby Trap".

A digital mock-up of the -D bridge.
Concept art for the Borg Artifact.
Studies for Alt-Picard's trophy skulls.
A Borg Queen containment chamber.
Concept art for the Borg Singularity.

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GOGMAGOG

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

356 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Authors **Jeff Noon, Steve Beard**

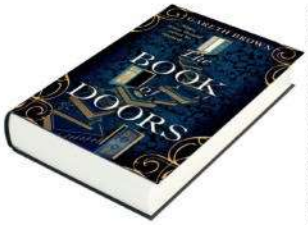
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Ideas compete for space in *Gogmagog*, the first half of a duology. Cady is an ancient riverboat captain, dragged out of retirement to pilot her old ship the Juniper, on a trip to deliver a young girl called Brin and her android guardian Lek to the city of Ludwich. The river that Cady must navigate, called the Nysis, is entwined with the ghost of a dead dragon and imbued with unpredictable, supernatural qualities.

The salty captain is an unlikely heroine, foul-mouthed and short-tempered. The book slowly reveals her true nature, although she's not always presented consistently. Cady bemoans her aged body, but in one scene she suddenly becomes a nimble and quick-footed fighter.

The plot struggles to convincingly establish why Brin and Lek are determined to procure her services when she treats them with naked hostility. Similarly, the primary threat feels remote from Cady, who's often an observer rather than the instigator of events.

While the world is richly imagined and evocatively conjured in lucid prose, the sheer volume of lore is a challenge to digest, cramming in everything from artificial life to necromancy, internal combustion engines to astral projection. The plot struggles against the weight of all this, resulting in a rather cluttered, frustratingly detached experience. **David West**



THE BOOK OF DOORS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

405 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Writer **Gareth Brown**

Publisher **Bantam**

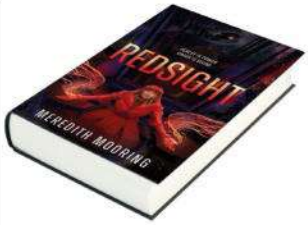
Readers like books – and, it seems, also like reading books about books, and about stories, and the importance of those things. It helps us feel validated. *The Book Of Doors* isn't the first (and won't be the last) novel to embrace this, but we admit to getting a warm fuzzy feeling when characters love losing themselves in books as much as we do. Sometimes literally...

Cassie is working in a New York bookshop when a regular customer leaves her a gift: a small leather tome that feels lighter than it should. She soon realises that it's something special – the Book of Doors, which can be used to step from any doorway through any other, anywhere in the world.

With her flatmate Izzy, Cassie is quickly drawn into a world of magic and terror, where other books – of Shadows, of Illusion, of Despair – are both treasured and abused. Many people collect such books, and are willing to do anything to acquire more.

It's an ambitious work that starts slowly and builds into a compelling story. The writing is occasionally clunky, with some unusual pacing – and we had hoped we'd moved past female characters appraising their looks in a mirror – but there are plenty of literal page-turning moments, and some clever plotting that leads to a satisfying ending.

Rhian Drinkwater



REDSIGHT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 29 FEBRUARY

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/

Author **Meredith Mooring**

Publisher **Solaris**

In a universe created by a triumvirate of female deities, three very different women from the Orders following each of those gods are on a collision course that threatens the status quo of the ruling Imperium.

The central character in this unusual body horror/fantasy/space opera hybrid is Korinna, a blind priestess and "Redseer" from a sect with the ability to bend space/time to pilot ships (though they do bleed a *lot* while doing it). She thinks she's an underachiever, but somehow lands a plum assignment on a warship on a mission to wipe out the sole surviving member of another, darker Order.

With its queer romance, exclusively female main cast and visually impaired heroine (author Meredith Mooring is, incidentally, blind herself), *Redsight* creates a rich but offbeat universe, full of delightfully esoteric world-building details tied to the lived experiences of the characters. There's a fascinating creation myth at its heart, and plenty of lurid gore to spice things up.

It is hampered, however, by utilitarian prose that makes even the most fantastic events feel rather mundane, a truly corny central love story, a few rather goofy concepts, and the fact that characters who seem cosmically powerful one moment seem weirdly rubbish at wiping out a few men with guns the next.

Deeply flawed, then, but also deeply intriguing.

Dave Golder

FATHOMFOLK

★★★★☆

RELEASED 29 FEBRUARY

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Eliza Chan**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

Wars and rising waters driving migration and waves of refugees; prejudice against those with less money and power, and those who look different... Yes, this debut may be a fantasy, but it certainly resonates with current global headlines.

In the half-flooded city of Tiankawi, humans live alongside "fathomfolk" – sea creatures such as sirens, kelpies and water dragons, who can slip through the water with ease or take semi-human form to walk around on dry land with only their neck gills to give them away. They're only tolerated – at best – by humans though, forced to wear bracelets that prevent them from ever harming someone – even in self-defence.

Half-human, half-siren border guard captain Mira has worked all her life to try and make things better for the folk, alongside her partner Kai, an ambassador. When Kai's sister Nami arrives, young and full of revolutionary fervour, Mira's careful appeals for justice may not be urgent enough.

This is a gripping look at a world familiar to our own, that eschews easy answers in favour of examining the complexities of revolution and power. Nami's insistence on action and conflict is easy to sympathise with, even as she struggles with just how far her comrades might be willing to go. A dramatic if unoriginal ending sets up a well-built world for a sequel. **Rhian Drinkwater**

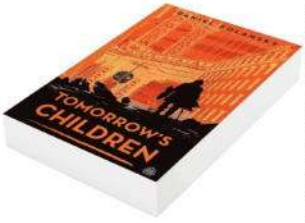
REISSUES

Our paperback picks include seafaring fantasy **THE ADVENTURES OF AMINA AL-SIRAFI** (★★★★☆, 29 February), first in a new series by

Shannon Chakraborty. It sees an ex-pirate returning to sea after being offered a fortune to rescue the kidnapped daughter of a former crewmate. Complicating matters: the kidnapper is searching for an eldritch artefact. We said: "Takes many of its cues from heist stories... Al-Siafri and her crew are fabulous additions to fantasy fiction's pantheon of antiheroes." Martin MacInnes's **IN ASCENSION** (★★★★☆, out now, Atlantic) concerns a researcher into ancient

algae who joins a research ship investigating a trench in the Atlantic. What's found there calls into question everything we know about humanity's beginnings, setting in motion a chain of events that sends her out into the Solar System. We said: "A widescreen slipstream novel that grapples with life and death in an era of accelerating climate change." Finally, Mark Lawrence's **THE BOOK THAT WOULDN'T BURN** (★★★★☆, 12 March, HarperVoyager) centres on a library that reaches across time and space, holding uncounted secrets. Apprentice librarian Livira is willing to

break every rule to divine its mysteries; meanwhile, Evar's been trapped inside since childhood, searching for a way out. We said: "Lawrence crafts a highly complex world, juggles multiple timelines, and tackles big ideas about history, identity and war."



TOMORROW'S CHILDREN

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 FEBRUARY
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Daniel Polansky**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Don't be put off by the bizarrely bland title; *Tomorrow's Children* is an adrenalised dystopian fantasy that's as near to a *Mad Max* movie in book form as you're ever likely to experience. You think James Patterson is pacy? He's glacial compared to Daniel Polansky, an author who's mastered the action montage *in words*.

Welcome to a future New York City cut off from the rest of the world by some ill-defined cataclysmic event known as the funk, where the inhabitants have gone feral, gangs are at constant war with each other, dog meat is haute cuisine and written language has devolved into emojis. When a gang led by a young Turk known only as The Kid wipes out an entire gang in one fell swoop, Manhattan's corrupt authorities reinstate an old sheriff with a fearsome reputation.

Filled with gnarly, world-weary characters just the right side of cartoonish, it feels a little like *Discworld* meets *Escape From New York*, but doesn't have the satirical bite of Pratchett's work. It's very funny for sure, but more *From Dusk Till Dawn* in its humour, and never quite develops its stylistic idiosyncrasies (footnotes that never tell you anything new; the emojis) beyond one-level gags. But it's utterly compelling, and often bewildering in the most intriguing ways. **Dave Golder**

MEET ME AT THE SURFACE

★★★★☆

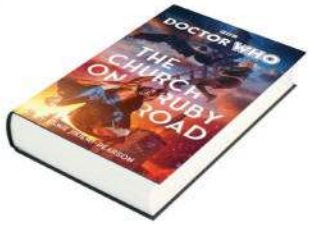
RELEASED OUT NOW!
304 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Jodie Matthews**
Publisher **Fourth Estate**

In this debut novel, gothic romance and Cornish folklore coil together like the scales on a mermaid's tail. We meet Merryn, a girl estranged from her mother, who returns to the wild lands that birthed her and the secrets that haunt the family home, slipping between scenes of her childhood growing up on Bodmin Moor and the present day, as she's lured back to attend the funeral of the girl she loved.

A love letter to Cornwall, this is a land where mermaids, selkies and fairy creatures called piskies are worshipped. It's lushly written, sensations and smells dripping vividly from the page: burst berries, the sweet smell of rot, the wildflowers of the Cornish moors, a farmhouse that stands stark in the moonlight.

Despite the prickly, complicated romance between Mer and her deceased girlfriend Claud, though, there's a strange lack of sexuality. A shame when everything else about the novel is so damply sensual.

It's a slow-moving portrait of grief, but easy to sink into, and it's beguiling to follow Mer's story as we try to untangle whether a shared madness inflicts the women of her family, or if the folk tales she's been fed from a young age speak of real creatures that haunt the Cornish landscape. **Kimberley Ballard**



DOCTOR WHO: THE CHURCH ON RUBY ROAD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
154 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson**
Publisher **BBC Books**

***Doctor Who*'s Target** novelisations used to have a clear purpose, in a world before repeats and video releases. Now that old episodes are available on your TV at the click of a button, it's harder to justify the need for a book, especially so soon after transmission.

It's even harder, in this case, to justify a hardback (still called a "Target novelisation" on the dust jacket) priced at £14.99 for just 154 pages, with an unembellished plot. Unlike even the recent releases of the Fourteenth Doctor's anniversary adventures, there are no interesting new takes or rhetorical flourishes here. It's very much a by-the-numbers adaptation, which exposes the simplicity of a plot designed for Christmas Day viewing.

In case you missed it, that plot is pretty straightforward. Ruby, a foundling, is harassed by goblins who cause mischief and mayhem and thrive on coincidences. When her adopted mother fosters a newborn baby at Christmas, the goblins steal it to feed to their king. Luckily, a newly regenerated, very well-dressed Doctor is around to help.

As with the TV episode, you fall in love with everyone involved, and there are some lovely character moments. It would just have been nice to have a bit *more*... **Rhian Drinkwater**

ALSO OUT

There are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Elizabeth May's Imperial Russia-inspired romantic fantasy **TO CAGE A GOD** (out now, Daphne Press) concerns two sisters raised as living weapons by a mother who grafted gods into their bones; with their country on the brink of war, they must take the helm of the rebellion. Stephen K Stanford's debut **JUBILEE** (out now, Flame Tree Press) sees a pair of detectives being drawn together while on a mission to recover the body of a conservative politician from a lawless world ruled by an eccentric AI. Sue Lynn Tan's collection **TALES OF THE CELESTIAL KINGDOM** (out now, HarperVoyager) expands upon her *Daughter Of The Moon Goddess/Heart Of The Sun Warrior* duology – inspired by the legend of the Chinese moon goddess – with nine short stories (seven original) set in the same world. Prequel adventure **STAR TREK: PICARD – FIREWALL** (29 February, Pocket Books) unfolds two years after USS Voyager's return home, as Seven of Nine decides to join the Fenris Rangers. Turning to continuing series: Hannah Kaner has followed up her accomplished debut *Godkiller* – centred on a swordswoman who hunts down chaotic gods – with **SUNBRINGER** (out now, HarperVoyager). And Jay Kristoff has penned a sequel to *Empire Of The Vampire*, his book set in a world where the sun no longer shines properly and vampires are slowly taking over: **EMPIRE OF THE DAMNED** (29 February, HarperCollins). Finally, coffee table book **THE ART AND SOUL OF DUNE: PART TWO** (1 March, Titan) delivers more concept designs and behind-the-scenes snaps. Spicy.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Katherine Arden

The American author isn't waiting for the muse to strike...

Describe the room in which you typically write.

My office is on the south side of my house, and the desk faces a window overlooking my flower garden. There are bookcases on two walls, a fluffy rug and an armchair for reading and editing.

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks within reach?

I have a bulletin board right next to my desk packed with notes, fan art, mementos, story ideas, reminders, and all kinds of other wonderful chaos. It cheers me up on bad days.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

My new book, *The Warm Hands Of Ghosts*. It is my most ambitious project to date, conceptually and emotionally complex. I had to fight for every word. But taking on big hard projects is how artists grow, and I am glad to have finished it.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

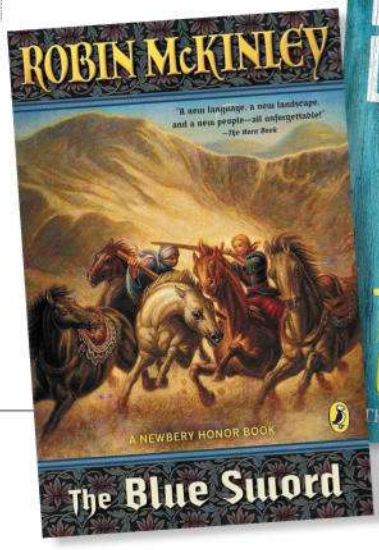
I have a perfectionist streak, which makes drafting novels difficult, since first drafts are by their nature messy. I cope by hand-writing first drafts – having to decipher my writing makes me less likely to reread and nitpick.

Were you a keen reader as a child, and if so who were your favourite authors?

I was a huge reader as a child. My favourite books were the Damar books by Robin McKinley: *The Blue Sword* and its prequel, *The Hero And The Crown*. I also loved Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* series.

If you could recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known, what would it be?

I'm on a personal mission to make more people pick up this series: *The Game Of Kings* by Dorothy Dunnett, the series opener to her historical tour de force The Lymond Chronicles. The series is a work of utter brilliance and needs to be a TV show. Like, yesterday.



A childhood favourite, and one she recommends.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

I was impressed by many, but a particular stand-out for me was *Ink Blood Sister Scribe* by Emma Törzs.

What's the best thing you've ever received from a reader?

I have gotten some lovely gifts over the years, but my favourite might be this beautifully embroidered decorative pillowcase a fan gave me in Croatia. It has motifs from my books on it. I keep it in my living room.

What's the biggest misconception people have about being an author?

A book you won't want to let go of
DIANA GABALDON
THE WARM HANDS OF GHOSTS
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KATHERINE ARDEN

That there is such a thing as a muse. There isn't. Writing is work. Novels don't descend from on high. They are built with time and patience and effort and skills won through mistakes. There are no shortcuts. Just because a great book feels effortless to read doesn't mean it wasn't very hard to write.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've either received or read?

Starting a story is easy. Finishing is much harder. You learn by finishing. Finish what you start.

The Warm Hands Of Ghosts is out on 7 March, published by Century. It is reviewed on page 86.

OUTSIDERS

Hasn't quite got the Authority

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writers **Jackson Lanzing, Collin Kelly**
Artist **Robert Carey**

ISSUES 1-4 **DC's Outsiders is a** superhero team with a long and storied history, and several distinct incarnations following the group's founding by Batman. This latest comic, however – a 12-issue limited series – stands apart from all of those. It's doing something quite different, but to explain how requires some big spoilers for the first issue.

Still with us? Good. Written by Jackson Lanzing and Collin Kelly, and drawn by Robert Carey with Valentina Taddeo on colouring duties, the new *Outsiders* starts with Kate Kane, aka Batwoman, having departed Gotham in the wake of the latest falling out between Batman and Catwoman, and trying to find a fresh purpose. That comes in the form of an invitation from Luke Fox to join a squad he's putting together.

Their MO is to investigate the fallout of the many multiversal calamities that have impacted Earth-0 over the years. Completing the trio is Drummer, a mysterious figure who clearly knows more than she is letting on, and who leads them to their first discovery: a buried spaceship called The Carrier...

A big cock and balls? Only if you have a dirty mind.

That sound you can hear is a lot of older comics readers suddenly sitting up in their chairs. Yes, *Outsiders* is, in an oblique way, a sequel to both *The Authority* and *Planetary*, a pair of beloved late '90s Wildstorm series created by Warren Ellis.

Drummer is a new incarnation of the similarly-named character from *Planetary*, while *Outsiders* issue four introduces a fresh take on one of the core players from *The Authority*.

In comics, that's a pretty big reveal. But *Outsiders* is also an *X-Files*-ish case-of-the-week series, which means that the focus – at least in this first third of the series – is rather scattered. Issue two is a fun undersea romp with another old DC concept, the Challengers of the Unknown, while issue three ventures into Batman's psyche in a muddled issue that feels like it should be outrageously weird and wild, but is instead disappointingly prosaic in its execution.

> **"Outsiders is a superhero team with a long and storied history"**

The premise of exploring the forgotten corners of the multiverse is an enticing one, as is the thought of following up *Planetary* and *The Authority*. So far, however, *Outsiders* lacks the spark of Warren Ellis's scripting on those books and feels constrained by its episodic format.

Likewise, Robert Carey's art is only solidly effective rather than astounding. Perhaps as the series fully embraces its mythology it will grow into something worthy of comparison to those illustrious originals. **Will Salmon**

i A big-screen version of *The Authority* is one of the films that James Gunn has planned for the first wave of the new DCU.

UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: DRACULA

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Skybound Entertainment /Image Comics**
Writer **James Tynion IV**
Artists **Martin Simmonds**

ISSUES 1-4 **Skybound's new** *Universal Monsters* comics line is off to a fine start with this impressively unsettling four-parter from the creators of *The Department Of Truth*.

Adapting Tod Browning's 1931 film of *Dracula*, James Tynion IV dispenses with the early scenes in Transylvania, opening with ill-fated ship the Vesta having docked in London.

With his stooge Renfield imprisoned in an asylum, the Count is initially a remote presence, making him even scarier as he carries out his attacks from the shadows. Following Lucy Weston's murder, Tynion concentrates on the rivalry between Dr Seward and Abraham Van Helsing, which leaves the former's daughter Mina in deadly peril.

Keeping his script fast-paced and taut, with several wordless sequences, Tynion leaves much of the narrative work to Martin Simmonds's evocative painted art. Mostly adopting a muted palette of browns and greens, his use of colour is striking, while his Joker-esque Renfield is actually even scarier than his depiction of Dracula himself.

The Creature from the Black Lagoon is arriving in the coming months, and on this evidence Universal Monsters might be more at home on the comic page than the big screen. **Stephen Jewell**

PETROL HEAD

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Rob Williams**
Artists **Pye Parr**

ISSUES 1-3 **It's always interesting** when *2000 AD* writers get to play in the sandbox of American mainstream comics, and the latest example is this delightfully entertaining post-apocalyptic robo-saga.

The brainchild of long-time *2000 AD* contributor Rob Williams, this new ongoing series is a gleeful slice of futuristic action-packed mayhem, in which humanity is stuck living in domed cities to escape the polluted environment. The titular Petrol Head is a robotic, borderline obsolete race-car driver with a liking for hot-rods, who ends up in serious trouble when he rescues a 10-year-old girl and her scientist father from the supposedly benevolent authorities.

Soon they're all on the run, and these first three issues waste no time in cranking up the lively, energetic chase sequences and offbeat humour. Williams has a fantastic handle on this big-hearted adventure, playing it as a wild mix of *2000 AD* classics like *Robo-Hunter* and Pixar movies at their best.

There's loads of charm, much of it coming via via the grumpy yet good-hearted Petrol Head, and Pye Parr's eye-popping art pushes the story's engaging style even further. The excellent design of the various robots and technology is matched by brilliant character work and blistering action, making this a must-read for any lovers of kooky, off-the-wall comic-book sci-fi. **Saxon Bullock**

Don't drink, don't kill, what do you do?

BATMAN: OFF-WORLD

Space Is The Place

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Jason Aaron**
Artist **Doug Mahnke**

ISSUES 1-3 **A huge proportion** of DC's output every month is dedicated to the Dark Knight and his associates. You imagine that it's sometimes hard finding new stories to tell within the confines of Gotham City, but that's not a problem for superstar Marvel writer Jason Aaron – now decamped to DC – and artist Doug Mahnke, who have sent the Caped Crusader interstellar.

Set early in his crime-fighting career, this six-issue miniseries sees Batman pay a visit to the Slag Galaxy (no, really). After an encounter with an alien on Earth, he decides that the only way to protect Gotham City is to see what life is like in the rest of the universe.

"Beats up alien goons and rides an enormous cyber-wolf"

That leads him to a spaceship ruled over by the ferocious Captain Synn, and into an uneasy alliance with Tamaranean bounty hunter Ione.

Mahnke and inker Jaime Mendoza are doing striking work here, while colourist David Baron uses every shade in the rainbow in his vibrant depiction of outer space. It's all a bit *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, but while the headline *Batman* comic is currently defined by Bruce battling his inner demons, *Off-World* is intent on having fun, as Bats beats up alien goons, rides an enormous cyber-wolf and makes friends with Punch-Bot – a masochistic training robot.

It's a big, witty, vibrant sci-fi adventure, but there's also a refreshing character dynamic here: nobody in the Slag Galaxy (did Danny Dyer come up with the name?) is particularly bothered by Batman. He does not impress them one bit, leaving our usually very capable crusader on the back foot throughout. **Will Salmon**

i After years at Marvel, Jason Aaron is now writing a slew of DC projects, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* for IDW.

WESLEY DODDS: THE SANDMAN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Robert Venditti**
Artist **Riley Rossmo**

ISSUES 1-4 **As part of DC's** current retooling of the classic Justice Society of America superteam, they're publishing several six-issue miniseries exploring the backgrounds and historical eras of these Golden Age heroes. Here, we've got a new take on the *original* version of the Sandman, '40s New York gentleman turned masked vigilante Wesley Dodds.

The basic set-up is that it's 1940, and Wesley's plan to use his sleep gas research to create a non-lethal weapon of war is derailed when his original, potentially cataclysmic research is stolen by a mystery antagonist.

The potential for nightmarish chemical weapons to be unleashed is a strong narrative hook, and these first four issues deliver a number of well-executed set-pieces, with some effective pacing. We also get fun visuals from artist Riley Rossmo, who brings a stylised approach to character and action alongside imaginative page layouts.

The series is held back, however, by the deliberately pulpy approach to the dialogue and characterisation, and the fact that there are too many moments when it feels like a Batman story with the serial numbers filed off. There's little effort here to push past the classic masked vigilante tropes, leaving this as a fun but shallow replay of other, better pulp adventures. **Saxon Bullock**

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

Assassins Crew

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **Xbox Series X**
- Also available on **PC, PS5**
- Publisher **Warner Bros Games**

VIDEOGAME ***Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League*** is a loud, messy attempt to simultaneously expand the scope, and constrict the size, of the Arkhamverse. Nine long years after the release of *Batman: Arkham Knight*, developer Rocksteady Studios returns to its pocket of the wider DC universe to burn it all down – charging you with the audacious task of assassinating the brainwashed Justice League.

It's in its characterisation of this story where the game is at its strongest, allowing you to jump relatively freely between Captain Boomerang, Deadshot, Harley Quinn and King Shark in a raucous adventure that's both smartly written and strongly performed.

Rocksteady has unleashed a rather attractive third-person shooter here. You're able to traverse a wide open Metropolis from the outset, hunting Batman, Flash, Green Lantern and Superman while battling hordes of Brainiac minions on sun-soaked rooftops across the City of Tomorrow. It's a fun, creative concept that's well-executed from a narrative perspective, but the core cycles of play fail to ignite the imagination.

One reason the *Batman: Arkham* trilogy found such success is that Rocksteady was able to focus its attention on building a playground befitting the Dark Knight – sprawling levels, combat systems and boss encounters designed to specifically reflect his particular proficiencies. *Kill The Justice League* isn't able to achieve a similar trick because of its four-player co-op framing, with the entire game needing to support any one of the antiheroes taking the lead at any time. It means that the characters handle remarkably similarly, and that the third-person gunfights are typically fairly rote experiences in shooting the same handful of enemies until they stop spawning.

POV: you're Harley Quinn's right contact lens.

> **"Mission variety is a key problem in the game"**

Mission variety is a key problem throughout the game, particularly as Rocksteady attempts to awkwardly fit this adventure into a looter-shooter framework (think *The Division 2*, but more colourful). Despite how inherently exciting the set-up is, there's just this pervasive feeling of boredom which gradually creeps throughout your playtime, compounded by the live-service setup which ensures the game never reaches a satisfying conclusion. While decent in short bursts, *SSKTJL* doesn't capture the thunderous thrills that Rocksteady built its reputation on.

Josh West

i We'll hear Kevin Conroy's last performance as Batman in *Justice League: Crisis on Infinite Earths – Part 3* later this year.

ABC WARRIORS: INCREASE THE PEACE

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Players **Two or more players**
- Publisher **Warlord Games**

TABLETOP GAME ***ABC Warriors: Increase The Peace*** is the third of Warlord's tabletop miniatures games based on characters from *2000 AD*. In many ways it feels like a direct continuation of their *Judge Dredd* title from a few years back. As with that, players activate models at random by pulling chips from a bag and then perform a variety of actions in small scale skirmishes. *Increase The Peace* adds a set of "Tarot cards" – ploys, basically – and some robot-specific rules, but otherwise the games are cross-compatible.

However, while the *Dredd* game pitted Judges against perps and had rules for sentencing criminals, this is set in the context of ABC Warriors' future conflict. You get eight miniatures, which works out as enough for two rival teams of three troops and a character (Hammerstein or Volkhan) on each side. These are multi-piece resin kits that require a little extra care while assembling, but are all satisfyingly chunky and comics-accurate. You also get some MDF scenery.

This starter set will only get you so far – you'll want to add more miniatures and scenery quickly – but as the rulebook states, "Let your imagination run free and enjoy your miniatures collection any way you like." **Will Salmon**

WARHAMMER: THE OLD WORLD

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Games Workshop**

TABLETOP GAME ***The Old World*** is a bit like port. If wargames were wine, this would be the richer kind; heavier, and more intense. That'll be an understandable turn-off for some, but anyone seeking something sophisticated will get their money's worth.

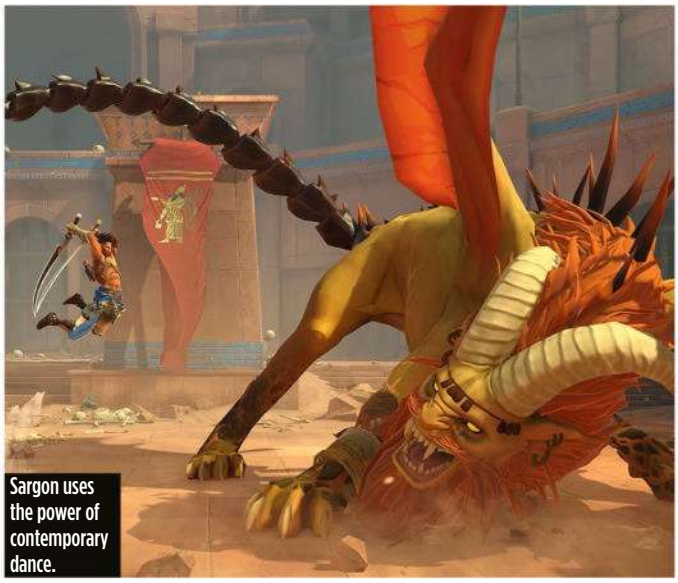
You could never argue that it's "just" another wargame, either; this version of *Warhammer* is grander than the skirmishes we're used to. Instead of models that move independently or in small groups, players direct chunky blocks of infantry, cavalry and monsters in a bid to outmanoeuvre their rivals.

The direction your warriors are facing plays a much bigger role as a result (hello, flanking), and that "crunchiness" defines *The Old World* in general. While the basics seem straightforward, there's layer upon layer of minutiae underneath for added intricacy – to say nothing of personalisation.

Not that such complexity comes as a surprise. This game is a throwback that's been aged out of sight for years. Games Workshop blew up *The Old World*'s predecessor (*Warhammer Fantasy Battles*) in 2015 and never looked back. With that in mind, this encore isn't as cynical as it might seem; there's been nothing like it from GW since then.

And honestly? In the time it's been away, it's aged like a... well, you know the rest.

Benjamin Abbott



Sargon uses the power of contemporary dance.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

A right royal renaissance

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PS4, Xbox One, PC, Switch**
Publisher **Ubisoft**

VIDEOGAME **Your relationship** with the *Prince Of Persia* series will likely reflect your age. For many, Ubisoft's 2003 reinvention of the franchise was the definitive crypt-crawling, spike trap-dodging experience.

But the 3D action-adventure trilogy doesn't paint the full picture. For players of a certain vintage, *Prince Of Persia* is all about two-dimensional platforming. It's about crumbling concrete walkways, death-defying leaps of faith and remarkable-for-their-time visuals, powered by the MS-DOS machines of the late '80s.

The Lost Crown strives to combine the two, with deft Metroidvania mechanics (where incrementally acquired abilities allow access to new areas in turn), larger than life boss battles, and more level-based hazards than you can shake your twin blades at.

Filling the shoes of nomad warrior Sargon, you're tasked with saving the prince across an ever-changing world that's as gorgeous as it is grandiose, chock-full of perfectly-balanced, brain-breaking puzzles that are often abstract but never unfair, with a library of powers and abilities that regularly bend time and space around you, and an array of ancient god antagonists that become increasingly vicious as you wade deeper into the game's circa 20 hours runtime.

For the most part it's brilliant, but *The Lost Crown*'s masterful level design and brilliant environmental conundrums are ultimately let down by a needlessly convoluted and forgettable overarching narrative. Still, when everything else is executed so well, that's easier to overlook.

Joe Donnelly

i At one point you meet a girl called Fariba. A tune she hums should sound familiar: it's the theme from the 2008 reboot.

DOCTOR WHO: BURIED THREATS

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
159 minutes | CD/download
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Usually with** these *Ninth Doctor Adventures* sets there's a clear stand-out – a story that leaps ahead of the pack as the best of the box. This time, however, all three have a lot to recommend them.

"A Theatre Of Cruelty" is a historical tale themed around the life of immersive theatre pioneer (and Christopher Eccleston's personal hero) Antonin Artaud, as dark forces from the dawn of time attempt to make use of his boundless imagination.

"The Running Men" is set in present-day Halifax and heavily inspired by local legend. The Doctor must team up with local copper Ambika Desai to stop an avaricious businesswoman from destroying the local gibbet and setting loose an alien evil

Finally, "Ancient History" reunites the Doctor with an old companion, archaeologist Bernice Summerfield, on a dig in the far future, which he must sabotage to prevent something terrible being unleashed on the universe.

While there are similarities in the premises for all three, this is a terrific set. Each story gives the Doctor a temporary companion – Fiona Wade is particularly good as Desai – and there's real emotional resonance to the Doctor's interactions with Artaud and his scenes with Bernice. He's saying nothing about the Time War, but his pain is more than apparent to his old friend. Great stuff. **Will Salmon**

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

ALIEN INVASIONS

They're coming! Prepare your brains for extraterrestrial subjugation, feeble Earthlings...

Quizmaster **Nick Setchfield, Editor at large**

QUESTION 1

In HG Wells's *The War Of The Worlds*, the Martians land on which English common?

QUESTION 2

Bill Pullman's President in *Independence Day* was a veteran of which real-world conflict?

QUESTION 3

"You'll never close your eyes again" – the poster tagline to which invasion tale from 1978?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this TV series about a decades-long plot to conquer the Earth.

QUESTION 5

Eighties show *The Tripods* brought to the screen a series of novels by which British author?

QUESTION 6

Which horror icon starred as Captain Rameses, leader of the Legion of the Winged Serpent, in *Starship Invasions*?

QUESTION 7

In the 1964 *Doctor Who* story "The Dalek Invasion Of Earth", what are the Daleks mining the planet for?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

An alien invades a family's home... but can you name the movie?

QUESTION 9

Arcade classic *Space Invaders* debuted in which year? a) 1976 b) 1977 c) 1978.

QUESTION 10

Orson Welles's 1938 radio adaptation of *The War Of The Worlds* was an instalment of which series?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11

According to the season nine finale of *The X-Files*, the alien colonisation of Earth was scheduled to occur in which year?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Supply the title that has been removed from the poster for this 1956 movie.

QUESTION 13

John Carpenter's *They Live* starred WWF icon Roddy Piper. How was he billed in the sport?

QUESTION 14

Which telltale physical quirk gave away the alien infiltrators in TV series *The Invaders*?

QUESTION 15

Doctor Who's UNIT was set up to fight alien invaders. What did the name *originally* stand for?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Which blackly comic alien invasion movie from the '90s was inspired by images like this?

QUESTION 17

Which pop star sang "Brave New World" on *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version Of The War Of The Worlds*?

QUESTION 18

Steven Spielberg was an executive producer on which series set in the aftermath of an alien invasion?

QUESTION 19

Which '80s TV classic started out as a script about non-extraterrestrial fascists titled *Storm Warnings*?

QUESTION 20

Which celebrated *Doctor Who* scriptwriter storylined the 1965 movie *Invasion*?

Answers

1 Horsell Common 2 The Gulf War 3 *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* 4 *Dark Skies* 5 John Christopher 6 Christopher Lee 7 The Earth's magnetic core 8 *Signs* 9 c) 1978 10 *The Mercury Theatre On The Air* 11 2012 12 *Earth Vs The Flying Saucers* 13 "Rowdy" Roddy Piper 14 Stiff little fingers 15 United Nations Intelligence Taskforce 16 *Mars Attacks!* 17 David Essex 18 *Falling Skies* 19 V 20 Robert Holmes

How did you do?

Rate yourself by global conquest

0-5 Random corn field

6-10 Ipswich

11-15 Luxembourg

16-19 Australasia

20 The world

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Jamie And The Magic Torch

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

It's interesting how cultural movements can percolate down from the adult sphere into children's entertainment. Take psychedelia: it had its heyday circa 1967/1968, but a decade later its aftershocks were still being felt in a Cosgrove Hall cartoon that captivated me as a kid.

Running from 1977-1979, each of *Jamie And The Magic Torch*'s 33 episodes (endlessly repeated in the '80s) saw the titular lad shining a beam onto his bedroom floor, opening a portal to a strange world called Cuckoo Land, reached by sliding down a brightly-coloured helter skelter. Accompanying him on his trips was Wordsworth, a bobble-hatted Old English Sheepdog who spoke like one of The Wurzels.

The Beatles' "Helter Skelter" springs to mind – as does the film *Yellow Submarine*. The Submachine, a flying contraption piloted by absent-minded professor type Mr Boo, is an obvious homage. Other regulars included Officer Gotcha, a copper on a unicycle; Nutmeg, a rag doll with a "mystery gift pocket"; and Strumpers Plunkett, who had a holey schnozz that he could play like a recorder.

Writer Brian Trueman (formerly a presenter on regional TV show *Granada Reports*) also supplied most of the voices. His scripts are not complex; a story can boil down to something as basic as "Objects need putting back in a box". In retrospect, it seems odd that we never learn the origins of the torch – a sonic screwdriver-like device capable of everything from shrinking objects to fixing poor build quality.

The best thing about the show is its theme tune. A glam rock-y number, its opening chords bring to mind a windmilling Pete Townshend. It closes with the exhortation "Switch on!" – a faint echo of LSD advocate Timothy Leary?

As a nipper I was unaware that a musician helped create the visuals too. Joy Division's Bernard Sumner was a "filler", hand-painting cels drawn by the animators. These periods of his life overlapped too – in his autobiography, Sumner recalls using a lunch break to research cover images for the band's first EP. Often he'd end up going straight to work after spending the night travelling to and from a gig! As a devotee of their glacial post-punk, that makes Jamie's adventures feel even more far out.

Ian is always there to lend a paw (or hand).

Fact Attack!

- According to the 1979 annual, Mr Boo's full name is Tickety Boo – hence his obsessive habit of checking things are in the right place.
- Sumner is credited as "Bernard Dickin" – that being the surname of his stepfather, who'd adopted him. He later reverted to his birth name.
- Stone Roses guitarist John Squire later worked at Cosgrove Hall too, making props like miniature chairs for *The Wind In The Willows*.
- Theme tune composer Joe Griffiths was also behind "A Hippo Called Hubert", the library music track used to back *Jigsaw*'s Noseybonk.
- Session singer Tony Steven also helped out on "Good Old Arsenal", a number 16 hit for The Arsenal 1st Team Squad in 1971.

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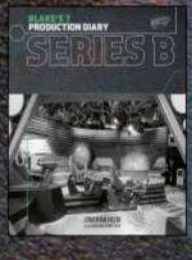

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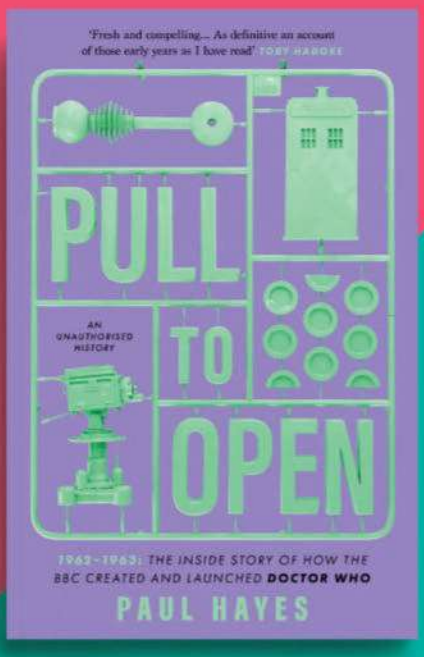
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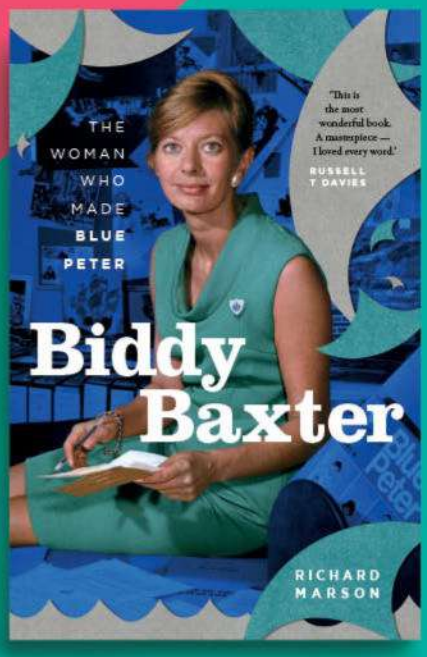
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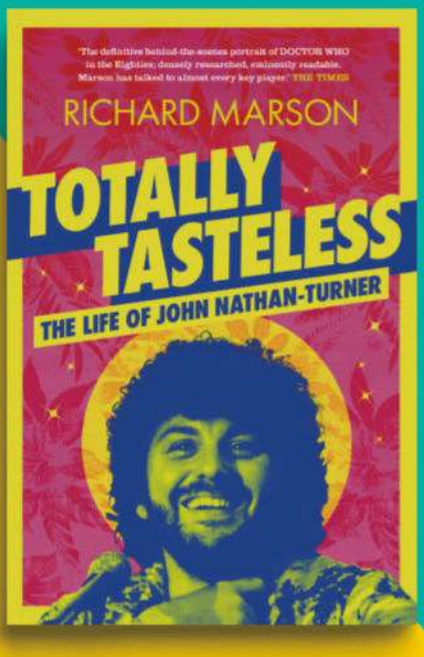
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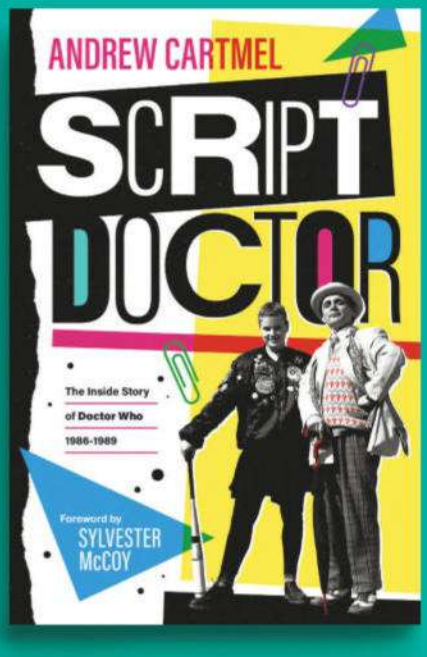

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